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OR, THE
RIVAL REPORTER'S
Sleek Scoop.

A STORY OF

Two Printer's-Devil Detectives.

BY J. C. COWDRICK,

AUTHOR OF "BROADWAY BILLY" NOVELS, ETC

CHAPTER I.

NIGHT-TIME TRAGEDY.

THE order had been given to look the forms and go to press, and the force of com.

THE TWO BOYS RAN THE FASTER, SHOUTING AS THEY RAN: "POLICE! POLICE!"

positors were putting on their hats and coats preparatory to going home.

In the office of the city editor a group of reporters were lingering, eagerly discussing the sensation of the hour—the strange disappearance of Elizabeth Hungerfort, wife of Joel Hungerfort, one of the leading merchants of the great metropolis.

The proprietor of the Herald-Record had offered a reward of one thousand dollars to any reporter on his paper who could successfully solve the mystery, and hence the matter had for them a double interest. But, as nearly a week had passed, and the case did not appear to be any nearer a solution than when first reported, it did not look as if any of them would claim the reward.

"I guess we are not in it this time, boys," remarked Billy Stevens, one of the "star" reporters of the staff, a fellow who had had more genuine "scoops" than any other man on the force, owing partly to the fact that he had no compunction respecting means so long as the end was achieved. "There is no clew to be had, and without a clew we cannot hope to do much. There is some satisfaction in knowing that the police are not ahead of us, anyhow."

"Nevertheless, I do not mean to give it up yet," declared Charley Hart, another reporter, who ranked second to none of them—not even excepting Stevens, but who was more of a stickler for points of honor than Billy.

"Oh! neither do I," hastened Billy. "Still, there is not much prospect of our winning the reward, I guess."

"Probably not," assented Charley.

Two boys were eager listeners to the above conversation, as well as to what followed. These listeners were two "printer's devils" belonging to the Herald-Record staff, and two as bright lads as could have been found anywhere in all the great city.

They were about of the same age and height, but one was inclined to be thin, while the disposition of the other was toward full flesh. They were chums, and both were thoroughly well-liked by all in the office.

The first-mentioned of the pair was named Larry Brennan, and the other was Fritz Kupfernicker. Needless, perhaps, to add that one was of Irish parentage and that the other was not of French descent. Larry had the advantage of being native-born, inasmuch as he was eligible for President, as he proudly boasted; while Fritz was liable for military duty in "das Vaterland" if he ever happened to be caught on native soil.

The Hungerfort case was a mystery indeed.

Nearly a week before the time of the opening of our story, the lady had disappeared from her home, and all the efforts of the police to trace her had thus far been in vain.

Her husband had left home one morning, as usual, to go down to business, leaving her in the best of health and spirits. On his return in the evening he was told that his wife was not at home—in fact, that she had not been seen since about an hour after his own departure that morning.

This was thought very strange, for the husband and wife had planned to attend the opera that evening and both had been looking forward with pleasurable anticipation to the event. At first, only private inquiry was made, but soon the aid of the police had to be sought. Mr. Hungerfort was almost crazed with alarm, for he was devoted to his young wife, and no shadow had ever come between them.

Detectives took the case in hand, and after them the reporters of all the newspapers in the city, but, as shown, no trace had any of them been able to discover. Search as they would, they could find absolutely no clew; and so stood the case at this time. Domestic happiness had been strikingly observable in that home, and no hint or suggestion of any "skeleton in the closet" could be got hold of. Servants were as much puzzled as master, and almost as deeply stricken.

The family had consisted of the husband and wife and an only child, a daughter aged ten. Besides these, a number of servants went to make up the household.

But to return to our printer's boys.

The compositors had all gone before, and the reporters had ended their discussion and passed out of the city editor's office, when, for the first time, they noticed the two "devils."

"Hello, comrades!" exclaimed Stevens. "Have you been taking that all in?"

"You bet!" responded Larry.

"Yaw, and maybe we takes in that thousand dollars, too!" supplemented Fritz, innocently.

This raised a laugh, for there was something inimitable about everything that Fritz said; not always the words, but his accent and manner.

"Well, next to winning it myself, I would like to see you two kids get it," averred Charley Hart. "I would certainly like to see it fall to the lot of somebody on the Herald-Record."

"And you are not generous enough to wish that I might get it, eh?" complained Billy Stevens.

"You?" exclaimed Charley. "The wonder will be if you do not get it, Billy. You get about everything there is to be had."

"I get some of what you leave, you mean. Ha, ha, ha! Well, so-long, boys."

With an airy and cheery wave of the hand he turned to the elevator, and in a few minutes all had gone, leaving the great building to the thunder of the mighty presses.

Larry and Fritz, as they turned their steps homeward, took up the same matter for discussion, going over all the points they had heard the reporters dwelling upon.

"I tell you what it was, Larry," remarked Fritz, "if we could only get hold of a string of that kite, it would be a big fishes on our plate, maybe; hey, what you say?"

"You are just right it would, Fritzey," was Larry's response. "But," he added, "it ain't no use fer fellers like you and me to think of that, when Billy Stevens is stuck."

"Yaw, maybe that was so; but, if we get hold of a clew you bet we goes for that reward, ain't it? We would go and tell Billy Stevens and make him promise us half to come in; hey, what you say?"

"Nix."

"Nein?"

"Not a bit of it, Fritzey. We wouldn't get a smell if we did, for Billy ain't that kind."

"What then?"

"We would try as detectives alone, first; then, if we found that we couldn't make it go, we would call in Charley Hart to help us out. Charley is the right stuff, you bet!"

"Yaw, that is so; but ain't Billy a good fellers, too? You don't think he would cheat us, do you?"

"He won't if he don't get a chance, Fritzey, that is a sure thing. And that ain't sayin' I don't like Billy, for I do like him—everybody likes Billy Stevens; but he is tricky all the same."

"Well, I don't know, Larry; you been born in this country, and I suppose you know better as I do about such things, ain't it? You was not quite so heavy as I was, but I always said you got more brains; hey, what you say?"

"That does not speak very well for you, Fritzey, that's one thing I say. But, hello! what's the matter there? Girls don't yell like that fer fun, Fritzey. Come, it is only around the corner, by the sound of it, and we must find out what is the matter. Mebbe it will make an item the cit. ed. will give us half a dollar for!"

They ran in the direction whence the cry had come, Larry leading and Fritz close at his heels.

At that hour of the morning the streets were well-nigh deserted, and the cry had come to the hearing of the two lads with startling distinctness.

That it was a female's voice was not to be doubted, while that it was a cry of either pain or alarm was equally evident. The boys, running at full speed, in a few seconds turned the corner, when they came suddenly upon an exciting scene.

By the curb was a carriage, with driver on the box. Close to the door of this carriage two men were struggling, evidently for the possession of a little girl which one of them held in his arm. At the moment Larry and Fritz appeared, this man struck the other a blow on the head with some weapon, dropping him to the sidewalk as if dead.

The girl screamed again once or twice, piercingly; the two boys ran the faster, shouting as they ran, "Police! Police!" but before they could reach the spot the man had sprung into the carriage, taking the girl with him, and the driver put the whip to his horses and was off at speed.

CHAPTER II.

THE COMRADES IN TROUBLE.

"Hully gee!" exclaimed Larry Brennan, "What do you make of this, Fritzey, boy?"

"I don't know what to make of it, Larry; maybe we got more as we bargained for that time, ain't it?"

"If we didn't we are likely to, if we fool around here now, fer there comes the coppers, and they are as likely as not to club us before they stop to ask any Q's. Come!"

"Which way you go?"

"We must keep that carriage in sight, or break a leg tryin'. Get a gait on, now!"

Off they went, as fast as they could leap, after the carriage which had then just rounded the corner.

A couple of policemen were coming up the street from the opposite direction, and were near enough to catch sight of the two boys, but not to stop them, though they called out for them to come to a halt.

That the comrades were not inclined to do.

"Stop!" the foremost "cop" called out. "Stop! or we shoot!" But, as the lads were then within a stride of the corner, they did not heed.

"Hustle, Fritzey!" urged Larry. "It looks well to be plump like you are, but every pound is a burden in a race like this. Wiggle faster, or I'll distance you."

"Yaw, you go faster, maybe, but I get there all the same, ain't it? We have got to run now, for those police fellers think sure we laid that man out where they find him. Better we stayed there and told them about it; hey, what you say?"

"Not a bit of it, Fritzey. They would run us in just the same, and then where would be our chance to get onto this

thing and make a scoop for our cit. ed.? But, if we don't get scooped ourselves, we'll be mighty lucky. Hang it! we can never hope to overtake that carriage, Fritzey."

"I guess you was about right there, Larry. Better save our own bacons, ain't it?"

"I guess it is, Fritzey. This way, and we'll double on them so they can't find us to save their necks."

Larry was right; it was useless for them to try to keep up with the carriage, for it was going a great deal faster than the regulation speed.

So they changed their course and dashed off in another direction, and when one of the policemen reached the corner and looked, carriage and boys alike were missing, and there was nothing they could do but give their attention to the injured man.

"Sure, is it killed he is?" asked one of the officers.

"I don't know yet," the other answered. "He looks enough like he was, anyhow."

"It is right you are. And, I say, what a striking resemblance he has to that man in the papers that lost his wife, so queer like, about a week ago."

"You are right! I was wondering where I had seen his face before, and that is just it; it was in the papers that I seen it. I'll be willing to bet a cigar that he is the very man!"

"Then there is more mystery for the detectives to puzzle their brains with."

"Not a doubt of it, in my mind."

"Too bad that we could not have got them two spalpeens that got away. If we had been but a minute sooner we would have had them."

"Well, go and ring up an ambulance, while I do what I can for him, and then we'll report the matter."

One of the officers hastened off thereupon, and the other remained with the injured man.

Meantime the two lads were scurrying along in the new direction they had taken, heading toward home, glad that they had escaped the police, yet sorry they had not been able to learn more about the affair.

They had a desire to keep out of the hands of the police, perhaps a wholesome one, for they would certainly have been detained as witnesses, if nothing more; and, once having been seen running away, it was, perhaps, the wiser course for them to keep on running.

Coming out into another street, what was their surprise to hear the rumble of a vehicle only a little distance off, and, on looking, to see that self-same carriage coming toward them, now at a moderate rate of speed such as would have drawn no suspicion had the lads not been witnesses to the scene we have described.

Larry was the one first to hear and see it, and he caught hold of his comrade's arm and stopped him short.

Fritz could hardly believe his eyes when he looked.

"It is the same one," he gasped in astonishment.

"Sure it is," averred Larry.

"And now we'll follow it."

"Well, you can bet your hat we will!"

Larry had pulled Fritz back out of sight, and there they remained while the carriage passed them.

"Now, then, for it," decided Larry. "They have no idea that we are here, but think they have shaken us off, and it ought to be easy to follow them now, if we take care."

"I am with you," asserted Fritz. "I was not born in this country, maybe, but you will find that I am yust so good

as if I was been, if we get us into any kind pickle, ain't it?"

"Well, I hope it is, anyhow, Fritzey," was Larry's response, and he led the way.

The carriage had by this time gained quite a lead, and in the darkness the comrades could follow it without much danger of discovery.

The driver of the vehicle had resorted to the same trick the boys themselves had played to baffle pursuit, and, by a strange coincidence, both had turned in the same direction.

They continued for some distance along that street; then the carriage made another turn and went in a nearly opposite direction, and the two lads, on running to that corner, found that the driver had materially increased his speed, and that they would have to run if they wanted to keep up.

This they promptly did.

"Shake yourself, Fritzey," urged Larry.

"Yaw, you bet I was," was the panting response.

"I have got a think in my thinker, if we can make it go."

"Yaw? What was it? I have always said that you have the most brains, Larry."

"You will find out your mistake some day. But what is the matter with our puttin' on more steam and catchin' on behind?"

"Yaw, that was yust the ticket!" acquiesced Fritz.

"Put her on, then."

"Yaw."

Larry, noticing the fact that there was no window in the back of the carriage, took the middle of the street for the chase.

He explained to Fritz as they ran that the occupant of the vehicle could not see them, and that they must take the chances of the driver's doing so. They ran fast, and eventually reached the back of the carriage undiscovered.

There they caught hold, and by keeping close up against the vehicle they hoped to escape the discovery of any one on the street.

Several turns were made, and a considerable distance covered.

At last the carriage stopped.

The driver had pulled in to the curb, and the moment the vehicle came to a standstill the man within opened the door and sprang out.

Larry and Fritz stood close together well under the shadow of the carriage, in order not to be seen, and were as silent as the vehicle itself, save for their breathing.

The man had the little girl in his arms, and it was plain that she had been rendered unconscious. He stopped to tell the driver to wait, and, having so done, ran lightly up the steps of the house opposite which the driver had stopped and let himself in with a night-key.

"What do you think now, Fritzey boy?" demanded Larry, in a low whisper.

"I think we have got one scoop for the policemen, maybe, ain't it?"

"I reckon mebbly it will be, if these fellers don't scoop us."

Fritz would have rejoined, but at that moment the driver got down from his place on the box, and Larry cautioned his comrade to silence.

They would have to remain where they were until the carriage started, in order to avoid discovery, so they silently waited, and in a few minutes the man came out of the house. The moment he reached the sidewalk the driver gave him a signal and sprang to the rear of the carriage.

CHAPTER III.

LARRY AND FRITZ IN LIMBO.

"What is it?" asked the man who had just appeared.

"You'll see," and the driver added: "Come out of that, you whelps!"

"Hully gee!" cried Larry, as he made a dash to get away. "They are onto us, Fritzey!"

"Yaw, that was so, Larry!"

"Bet your lives we are onto you!" grated the driver, laying hold upon Larry.

The other at the same time grabbed Fritz, and, both being powerful men, the comrades stood small chance for getting away till the men were willing to let them go.

They took good care that the boys made no outcry, having at once clapped their hands over their mouths, and before the comrades had time to realize what was going to happen they were bundled into the vehicle.

Both men got in with them.

"Who are they?" asked the man who had just come out of the house.

"That is for them to say," answered the driver of the carriage. "They were as quiet as mice, but the light from a lamp behind there threw the shadow of their legs under the horses, and so I got onto them. If I am not greatly mistaken, these are the two kids who came running up to the place where—where we stopped before."

"You think so?"

"I feel pretty sure of it. I had a glance at their faces while you were getting in."

"What do you say to that?" turning to Larry. "I'll take my hand from your mouth while you answer, and if you speak louder than I am speaking now, or try to make any outcry, I will wring your neck for you right here. Do you understand what I say?"

Larry made an effort at nodding.

"Well, then, what were you doing under my carriage?"

"We were only goin' home from work, sir," answered Larry, "and as your carriage was goin' our way we thought it would be no harm to hook on behind and run along."

"Going home from work—at this hour?"

"Yes, sir."

"What kind of work do you do, then?"

"We are printer's devils, sir, on the Herald-Record newspaper."

"Hang the Herald-Record and all connected with it!" the man exclaimed. "What do you think?" turning to his companion, who was holding Fritz so that it was impossible for him to make a sound.

"I think they are lying," was the answer.

"No, sir, that's sollum truth, every word," Larry insisted.

"Then you didn't see—didn't see me when I got into the carriage, eh? Better be careful not to lie to us."

"Wouldn't think of doin' such a thing," declared Larry. "We were comin' along — street when you turned out of — street, and we thought it wouldn't do your old trap no harm."

"I know better," spoke up the other man. "These are the fellows, and it is pretty certain they saw us before that time. Besides, they have owned that they belong to that infernal Herald-Record, and that is enough in itself. I think we had better hold fast to them."

"What will you do if we let you go?" asked the other of Larry.

"Dust fer home, quicker than soon," was the prompt answer. "You just try us and see."

"And then dust to that newspaper office and tell what you know, eh?" the other man suggested. "I don't think we can afford to take the chances."

"I guess perhaps you are right, since you seem pretty positive in your recognition of them," the other agreed. "But, then, the question arises, what are we going to do with them? Confound them, anyhow!"

"Yes, that is the question, sure enough."

"Can't you suggest something?"

"I can," said Larry.

"What is it?"

"Drive around and put us down at our own door."

"You have got altogether too much tongue, boy. Well, we can't stand here with them, that is certain, for some meddling policeman will be asking questions."

"Yes, that is so, seeing no one about. Here, I will bind this fellow, and you can easily attend to both of them. We will drive them around to McCasket's and Sam will take care of them for a slight consideration."

"Just the idea," agreed the other.

Accordingly, the man who acted as driver tied Fritz's hands behind his back, and, that done, put a gag into his mouth.

Having done so, he got out and mounted to the box, and the carriage started.

Larry and Fritz felt that they were in something of a fix now, sure enough. Where their adventure would end they dared not imagine. It looked as if they were in serious trouble.

Fritz was helpless, as shown; and the man having again placed his hand over Larry's mouth, it was impossible for the boy to make any outcry, even if he would have dared to do so, after the threat made.

The carriage rolled on at a leisurely rate of speed, and in the course of twenty minutes came to a stop before a large building, having the appearance of a clubhouse. The two comrades heard the driver give a signal of some kind, and the man within the carriage sat still and made no offer to move.

In a few minutes a policeman passed along leisurely swinging his club. He spoke to the driver, and the driver asked him what time it was.

They exchanged a few commonplace remarks, and the policeman went on his way still swinging his club.

Some minutes of silence, then, and then another signal.

The man within now acted.

Opening the door of the carriage, he looked up and down the street quickly.

No one was in sight, and he got out immediately, dragging Larry after him.

The driver had given no false assurance; the coast was clear in every direction. The driver, too, had got down from his place, and had secured his horses.

At that hour, and in that particular place, there was nothing strange about a carriage standing on the street; it was a house or resort that was open all night, and the sight was no unusual one. All of which was most favorable for the men's operations.

By the time the man who had Larry in hand had left the vehicle, the driver was ready to take charge of Fritz, and lost no time in doing so. He reached for the fat partner and dragged him out, and in a moment the boys were hustled across the sidewalk into the building.

It was the first time they had ever been in such a fix, and naturally they did not relish it.

What was more, they did not know what the outcome would be.

Larry and Fritz had by this time "tumbled" to one point in the game, and that was that the driver of the coach was not a coachman; in fact, he was "playing in" with the other, evidently.

From what they had already seen, the lads had every reason to believe that they had fallen into the hands of a pair of arch rascals. The comrades gave each other a commiserating look as their eyes met. They were certainly in for it.

Once inside the building, the two men threw off all attempt at secrecy, and, each taking up the boy he had in charge, they hurried with them up the broad stairs, observing some caution not to make too great a noise. Larry was not a heavy load, but by the time they reached the second landing the man who carried Fritz was panting.

"Whew!" he exclaimed, when he let him down, "but you are a load, you young rascal!"

"You didn't have to bring us here," protested Larry, "so what are you kicking about?"

"We'll be kicking you about, if you try to be funny," the other gave warning. "Hold your jaw!"

They rested there for a minute; then, lifting their prisoners again, they bore them quickly up the next flight of stairs.

Here were no lights, and when they had put the lads down one of the men stepped apart from the other and touched a button on the wall.

The faint tinkle of a bell was heard, and in a few moments a step sounded on the stairs. A darky in a white jacket was soon seen coming, and reaching the spot inquired what was wanted. He was larger than either of the other men.

"Do you see these two boys?"

"Yes, sah, I see 'em," was the response.

"Well, we want you to take charge of them for a time, and see to it that they do not get away from you."

"Huh! I reckon dat I kin do dat, sah; I would like to see 'em git away from Sam Jones, if he don't want 'em to go, sah. You know me, I guess."

"Yes, we know you well enough, Sam, and we know that we can rely on you every time. We want you to take good care of these cubs till we tell you to let them go. They are not to be harmed, you understand."

The darky understood perfectly—the better, perhaps, on account of the piece of money which was slipped into his hand, and after a few words in whispers the two men went away, leaving the hapless comrades in his keeping. They were quickly put into a room, where the door was locked upon them, and there they were left alone.

CHAPTER IV. ANOTHER REWARD.

Mystery was added to mystery.

At an early hour that morning the butler in the Hungerfort household reported to the police that Mr. Hungerfort and his child were both missing!

That was not all. The police were able to inform the butler that his master had that morning been found unconscious on the street, and the question then was, what had become of the child? And it was a question that could not be answered.

Of course, live newspaper reporters were not long in getting hold of the newest sensation.

Among these were Billy Stevens and Charley Hart.

These two met at the Hungerfort residence, whither both had hastened on hearing of the new sensation.

Up so late at night, they were not early risers, and by the time they learned about the matter they were informed, also, that Mr. Hungerfort had been taken home.

The object of both these young men was the same, of course—namely, the securing of an interview with Mr. Hungerfort; but, on arriving at the house, they were denied that privilege. Mr. Hungerfort, they were assured, could not be seen.

So they had to content themselves with interviewing the butler and the other servants.

That was by no means satisfactory.

"What do you make of it all, Charley?" asked Stevens, as they left the house together.

"I know not what to make of it, Billy," was the reply. "The matter seems to grow more mysterious at every step."

"Yes, you are right, it does. The child leaving the house in about the same mysterious manner as her mother, and then Mr. Hungerfort's being found insensible on the street, at that hour."

"As you remarked at the office, I am inclined to think that we are not in it, true enough, for now the fog has settled down thicker than ever. If there was no clew before, there is even less of a clew now. I wish you would solve it."

"I wish you would solve it."

"And I wish you and I together might do it, Billy."

"No, I prefer to go it alone, Charley. I need that thousand dollars about as badly as anybody I know of, and I am going to make a tall hustle to get it."

"All right; I shall not urge you, of course; but I was thinking that, perhaps, if we did go into it together we might stand a better show of success, and five hundred apiece would not be bad to take."

"That is all right; but don't you think yourself that you would feel better satisfied to have the whole thousand?"

"Yes, perhaps I should; but in that case I would see five hundred as the highest stake."

"I think that each had better go it alone."

"All right."

"That is no reason why we should not talk the matter over together, however, if you are willing," suggested Stevens.

"And I am perfectly willing," Hart agreed.

"What, then, do you suppose took that child out of the house without the knowledge of any of the servants?"

"That is one of the puzzling points in the case."

"You have no theory?"

"None."

"Then, how came Mr. Hungerfort where he was found? What was he doing there at that early hour of the morning? Where is his child at this moment?"

"Likewise the mother?"

"Exactly. I tell you there is more back of this, Horatio, than you ever dreamed of in your philosophy."

"And that is the very thing that we reporters and the detectives are trying to get at," asseverated Hart. "I am of two opinions in regard to the mystery."

"You said you had no theories."

"I did not hold these worthy to be called such."

"Well, what are your two opinions, then?"

"First, that the servants in that house know more than they are willing to tell, and are holding something back to shield

their mistress; or, that they have told all they can tell, and the mistress has succeeded in deceiving them as well as her husband."

"Ha! Then you believe that Mrs. Hungerfort is at the bottom of the whole affair, do you?"

"I do not know how to explain it in any other way."

"Even that does not explain it to my satisfaction. I am of opinion that she is as good and true as they all declare her to be."

"And I hope she is, certainly."

"Well, what are you going to do now? If we cannot work upon the thing together, Charley, it will be all the better if we have some understanding so that we will not be falling over each other."

"If anything of that kind happens, we can get up and apologize," assumed Hart. "If we are to go it alone we might as well go entirely alone, I think."

"No doubt you are right, and as I refused your offer to share, of course I can find no fault."

They had stopped at a corner to talk, and soon they parted company and each went in a different direction.

What of their conversation we have recorded had not been without its motive, as the reader must have seen. Stevens had wanted to get whatever he could of Hart's ideas and plans, while Charley, on his part, had endeavored to learn what Billy thought.

"Well, I am glad that he thinks as I do on one point, anyhow," Charley mused, as he walked away. "Neither do I believe that Mrs. Hungerfort is otherwise than they all hold her to be. If it turns out differently I shall be very much disappointed, that is all. I had rather think that Mr. Hungerfort is at the bottom of it himself; but that, of course, is ridiculous."

Hart had an objective point in mind.

Fifteen minutes' walk brought him to the office of a physician, and his ring at the bell was promptly answered.

"Is Dr. Graves at home?" he inquired.

"Yes, sir."

"I desire to see him at once, not professionally."

He gave his card, and stepped into a little reception room on the right of the hall.

Almost contrary to his expectations, the servant immediately reappeared and requested him to step into another room where the doctor would see him at once.

In his experience as a reporter Charley Hart had met with so many rebuffs and refusals that this was an agreeable exception to the rule. He had only a few moments to wait when the doctor entered. He had the card in his hand.

"You belong on the 'Herald-Record,' do you, young man?" he interrogated.

"Yes, sir," Charley promptly answered.

"Well, what can I do for you?"

"I hope you can tell me something which will throw light upon the Hungerfort mystery, sir," he explained.

"That is what has brought you here, eh? I thought as much the moment I read the name of the paper on your card, and that is the very thing I want to see you about."

"You want to see me about it?"

"Yes; why not?"

"I know of no reason why not, sir, of course; but it seemed strange, that was all."

"I believe your paper has offered a reward of one thousand dollars to the man who can solve this great mystery—"

"To the man on their own paper, sir," the reporter corrected.

"Yes, I understand. Well, that being

the case, you will naturally exert all there is in you to win the prize."

"We are all eager to do that, sir," the young man assured.

"Just so. And now, to the point: Mr. Hungerfort was—rather, he is—a dear friend of mine; which being the case, I need not tell you that I am eager and anxious to see this mystery solved and his wife restored to him."

"Then you do not believe she went away of her own free accord?"

"No, sir, I do not. There never was a truer or more devoted wife than Elizabeth Hungerfort, and there is something back of all this for which she is not to blame."

"I am glad to find that you, too, hold this opinion, sir."

"Who else holds it?"

"I, for one. But when I spoke I had in mind the best man on the 'Herald-Record' staff—the best reporter, I mean."

"And who might that be?"

"Billy Stevens."

"He has been here, Mr. Hart."

"If that is the case, it is useless for me to take up your time, sir."

"Hold on; I had not done yet. I was about to add that I was so busy when he called that I had to decline seeing him. He did not waste any time waiting."

"That is Billy's way."

"He did not appear to be very persistent, for a reporter. But, no matter about that; you are here now, and I will say to you what I would have said to him, if I could have seen him. You accredit him with being the smartest man on your paper, but I like your looks well enough. I want you to win that reward."

"You want me to win it?" in some surprise.

"Yes, sir; I want you to win it, for the reason you have heard me mention. Mr. Hungerfort is almost crazed with grief; I have found it necessary to forbid his seeing any one, and unless something can be done quickly I will not answer for his reason. Now, to the point: I will tell you everything I can about the matter, and I will take it upon myself to add a further inducement of five hundred dollars to the reward already offered!"

CHAPTER V.

PROSPECT OF A SENSATION.

Charley Hart was not a little surprised.

And yet, taking together all the doctor had said, there was no real occasion for surprise.

The doctor, being a friend of Mr. Hungerfort's, as he had declared, would naturally feel concern for him at a time like this, and knew that, whatever he might do would be accounted all right.

There was a minute of silence.

"Well, will you undertake it?" Dr. Graves demanded.

"Why, sir, I am already undertaking it," was the response.

"Yes, I know; but will you take hold of it with the determination that you will win?"

"That, too, is already down on my programme, sir," was the smiling response. "You are taking me over ground already covered."

"Pshaw! I will come to the point at once: Will you keep secret something which I will disclose to you, and may have some bearing upon the mystery?"

"Do you overlook the fact that I am a reporter, sir?"

"I am not speaking to you now as to a reporter, but as to a gentleman of honor."

"Then do you hold that a man cannot be a reporter and a gentleman of honor at the same time?"

"There are reporters and reporters, Mr. Hart. In this instance I want to talk with the man and not the reporter."

"You place me in an awkward position, Dr. Graves."

"How is that?"

"In view of the reward offered by the Herald-Record."

"Ah! I see. You will feel that you are bound to reveal everything to your paper."

"That will be required, sir, if the reward is to be paid. In fact, in no other way can the reward be obtained. That is what it is offered for—the solution."

"What if I make the reward a thousand dollars instead of five hundred?"

"I would not be true to my paper if I accepted it, sir."

"Then you can not agree to what I ask of you?"

"I am afraid not, Dr. Graves, under the circumstances. You had better employ a private detective to serve you, I think."

"Pshaw! Are they not at work on the case now? You fellows of the Herald-Record have done a great many clever things, and I hoped that I could get you to do this."

"Our first interests are for our paper, Dr. Graves."

"Well, well; I should have known it, of course. If that is your decision, I can tell you no more."

"Nor can I ask it, under the circumstances, sir. But, you have given me something of a clew to work upon—or, if not really a clew, a pointer in the direction of one."

"Little good it will do you, however. Is there anything more I can do for you, Mr. Hart?"

"Probably not, sir."

Charley knew that was an end of the interview, unless he had a mind to prolong it by asking questions, and that, under the circumstances, he felt he could not honorably do.

He took his leave.

"I wonder if I am a fool?" he asked himself, as he went away. "Now, if it had been Stevens he would have promised anything, no matter what, to have gotten hold of that bit of information. I am afraid I am too honest for the profession, but I can't help it."

He was in a thoughtful mood as he went down the street, and muttered his reflections half aloud.

"I think I had better put my finer feelings in a bottle and cork up the bottle, or drop out of the service," he mused. "If it had been Billy, he would have had the whole story, in no time, no matter what he promised, or whether he kept the promise or not. I have let go my best chance to get hold of a clew, I am afraid."

He switched his leg sharply with his little cane, a way he had when in deep study, and paid no attention to anything as he hastened along with another object in view.

"There is no doubt about it; I should have tried questioning, I fully believe," he said further. "It could have done no harm, and if he gave me any information in answer to my questions, that would have been his own lookout. Well, it is too late now, and the only thing I can do is to try to make up the loss in some other way. He knows some secret that may have a bearing on the matter, for he said so; and I must try by some means to find out what that secret is. It is something to know that he has full

confidence in Mrs. Hungerfort, the same as Billy and myself, anyhow."

And musing thus, he proceeded on to his place of destination.

Not long had he been gone from the office of Dr. Graves, when Billy Stevens ran lightly up the steps of the doctor's residence and rang the bell.

The doctor could see him this time, and he was shown into the room where Hart had recently been.

"You have called again," the doctor observed, on entering.

"Yes, sir. We fellows of the press do not give up so easily. I took it for granted that the excuse you made before was all true enough."

"I assure you it was, Mr. Stevens," with a glance at the card. "I have just been honored with a visit from another man on the same paper with yourself."

"Charley Hart?"

"That was his name, sir."

"Good fellow, Charley! Well, if you granted him an interview, of course you will serve me the same. At any rate, I hope you will, sir."

"What do you want to know, Mr. Stevens?"

"Everything that you can possibly tell me, sir. By your orders, no one can get at Mr. Hungerfort, and so we have to come to you as the next best thing. Has he revealed anything to you?"

"He is almost crazed with grief, sir, and I am afraid that his reason will give way if his wife or child is not restored to him soon. I made your confrere an offer of five hundred dollars extra reward if he would agree to a certain condition, but he declined."

Billy's eyes opened wide.

"Offered him that extra inducement for what, sir?"

"To make extra effort to solve the mystery. But he could not agree to the condition."

"And what was the condition? Perhaps it is something that I will not be so particular about; though, of course, I will not agree to anything that is not square."

"Certainly not. It was simply this: I know something that may have a bearing upon the mystery, but it is something that would do the public no good, and for that reason I must ask you to forget that you are a reporter for the time being. Let us talk as man to man."

"Agreed, sir!"

"Very well. Now, then, if I tell you this thing, will you promise that you will not put it into print, nor in any way reveal it?"

"Certainly, sir."

"I am a close friend to Mr. Hungerfort, outside of my relations to the family as physician, and I am full of sympathy for him in his trouble. Whatever I do, he will sanction it."

"I follow you, sir."

"Well, you are in this thing to make money, that is plain. That is what we are in the world for, Mr. Stevens; that is business. If I offer you another thousand dollars on top of the reward offered by the Herald-Record, will it be that much extra incentive to effort?"

"To be candid with you, sir, no!"

"Why?"

"Because I am already doing all in my power to get at the secret; that is the reason, sir."

"Then there is no reason why I should offer the reward, that I can see. Bear in mind, I am taking Mr. Hungerfort's business upon myself, and for the time being I am Mr. Hungerfort, to all intents and purposes; can you follow me in the figure, sir?"

"Perfectly, sir."

"On the other hand, I offer an extra thousand if you will agree to keep from the public a certain secret which I will reveal to you. It is something that may throw light upon the mystery, if properly handled, but it is also something that does not concern the public and which they have no business to know anyhow."

"I understand you, sir."

"Well, then, you may solve the mystery to the satisfaction of your paper, and so win their reward; but at the same time, I have no doubt you will be able to hold back this item and so earn the reward which I offer. What do you say to trying it?"

"I am your man," assented Billy, promptly.

"As I hoped you would be, sir. Your paper has done clever things, even outstripping the police and private detectives in some instances, and your colleague has named you as the smartest of the lot on the staff."

"Much obliged to Charley, I am sure. He is too modest by far, sir."

"No matter; he seemed to mean it. Now, this is something which has been mentioned to only one private detective, but he does not appear to be making any headway. It is also something which must be kept from Mr. Hungerfort, if possible to do that. Have I your word of honor that you will observe faithfully the pledge you have taken?"

"You have, sir."

"Very well, then, give me your attention and I will tell you something about the Hungerfort family which you do not know."

CHAPTER VI.

THE COMRADES PAROLED.

Larry and Fritz, when thrust into the room and left there, found themselves in utter darkness.

Fritz was still bound and gagged, and Larry was bound, too, but he had the use of his tongue. And, no sooner had the darky gone, locking the door after him, than the lad began using that active member.

"Hully gee!" he exclaimed, "but we are in a fix now, Fritzey, for certain. What are we goin' to do about it? What will our wives and children think, when we do not turn up at the domestic domicile at the usual hour? Why don't you say something?"

Something between a grunt and a groan from Fritz reminded Larry that his comrade was gagged.

"I clean forgot that you have got that hankercher in yer mouth, Fritzey," he hastened to add. "Why didn't you say somethin' about it? I would have taken it out fer ye, if ye had only minded me of it. As ye didn't, I'm on me dignity now and won't—seein' that my hands are tied behind my back. If you are too proud to speak, don't."

At that, Fritz gave forth a sound that was unmistakably a growl, and Larry had to laugh in spite of the fact that they were in a serious dilemma.

"Scuse my laffin', Fritzey," he placated, "but I couldn't help it. I was thinkin' that I have got ye in a fix where ye can't talk back at me, and it hit me funny, that was all. If you will just untie my hands, I will have you out of that in a jiffy. Then we will put our cocoanuts together and see if we can't think up some sort of a skeem to get out of here. We have got to make our exit somehow."

Again Fritz sounded forth some mingled grunts and growls, this time with so much force that Larry ceased his joking and became serious about the situation.

He rattled away for some minutes, in his way, suggesting first one thing and then another, but he could not seem to think of any plan that was feasible. Both having their hands tied, their predicament was slightly awkward, to say the least about it.

"Ha! now I have it, Fritzey," he exclaimed, after a moment of silence. "You have given me the credit of being the brains of our combination, but I have to plead not guilty to the charge, yer honor. I have got a pretty good double set of sure-enough teeth, however, and mebbly I can untie that thing that is in your mouth, if you will hold still. I'll try not to bite your ears off."

Fritz grunted his assent.

Larry felt his way to the desired position, and finding the knot with his nose, set about untying it with his teeth.

It required some minutes of patience and steady application to accomplish the task, but at last the knot loosened and then it was easy enough to complete the operation.

"What for you didn't think of that long time ago?" Fritz demanded, rather sourly. "You leave me with that nasty thing in my mouth so long like I hardly can't shut my jaws any more, ain't it? You might done that quicker, if you only thought, maybe."

"Maybe—that is the right word, Fritzey boy. If I had brains I would have thought of it, and that is further proof that you are wrong in thinkin' that I have got any of that article stored away in my nut. Now that you have got the use of your jaw, maybe you can suggest something for the rest of the business, hey?"

"Yaw, maybe I can."

"Well, spit it out, then."

"You yust stick your head in my pocket and get out my knife and open it with your teeth, and then you cut—"

"If I could see where your fattest place is, I would give you a kick for your funny business," Larry interrupted. "Hold around here, and let me try my teeth again."

Needless to dwell upon it at length. Their hands were finally freed, and the first thing they did was to light a match and take a view of their prison room. It was a large apartment, and was rather handsomely furnished. It looked like a private gaming-room.

The light of the match revealed a gas jet, and Larry soon ignited that and they had plenty of light.

"Well, it ain't so bad, after all," he said. "They have given us about the best in the house, I guess, by the looks of things. Maybe they wouldn't have done it if they had thought we would get our hands free."

"You are yust about right," agreed Fritz. "Pretty good places, but all the same a pretty good places to get out of."

"A pretty bad one to get out of, I should say, Fritzey boy."

"Well, you know best, Larry; you been born in this country and I wasn't, and that makes a difference."

"You bet it makes a difference, when you want to be President. Well, let's take a proof and see what we've got, anyhow. Here is this door where we came in, locked tighter than a form."

"Yaw, that was so, Larry."

"And that is the only door here, sure as you live, 'cept this one that must open into a closet."

"Yaw, and that one is locked, too, ain't it? We been here to stay, maybe, Larry, unless we kick down the houses. What for we went to meddle with other people's business?"

They made a thorough investigation, which only resulted in a confirmation of their suspicion that they were safely locked in.

They had talked incessantly all the time, nearly—at any rate Larry had done so.

"It is no use, Fritzey boy," he finally declared. "We may as well give it up and wait to see what they will do with us. Here's cards in this drawer; suppose we try a game at casino while we wait?"

"Better we holler polices, ain't it?" suggested Fritz.

"And have that big black come up here and knock us kicking?" said Larry. "Not any. He would only tie us up again, and would do it in such a way that we wouldn't get loose in a hurry."

"Well, you know best, I suppose; you been born in this country."

Larry's suggestion was adopted, and in a little while they were so interested in their play that they forgot their troubles.

Finally daylight looked in at the windows of the room, gradually causing the gaslight to pale, and when the two lads were beginning to get pretty hungry, a step was heard in the hall.

A key was turned in the lock and the door opened.

It was the darky who had charge of them, and he stopped short and opened his eyes to their widest on seeing them free.

"Hello, Sammy!" greeted Larry.

"Fo' de Lawd!" the darky ejaculated. "How you done got loose?"

"Oh, you forgot to release us, so we thought we would do it ourselves," was the sprightly response.

"Don' see how you ever done it, for a fack," Mr. Jones mused, scratching his wool thatch. "Well, I 'pine to reckon dat you wants yo' breakfast; ain' dat so?"

"That is a pretty close guess, Samuel," answered Larry.

"Yo' want to call me Mistah Jones, if yo' please," said the gentleman of color, to check familiarity.

"All right, have it that way if you want to," rejoined Larry. "We'll order up a breakfast, since you have mentioned it, and you want to bring us the best the ranch affords."

"Golly! who am yo' talkin' to, anyhow?"

"To Mister Jones. I suppose the boss that left us with you will foot the bill, and if he don't you will have to charge it to him. See?"

"Well, he said I was to give you yo' breakfast, but I don't take no orders from de likes ob you; see? You wan' to be civil, or de worse fo' you. You have been fair-to-middlin', though."

Breakfast was served to them, but they were kept close prisoners, and it was not until well along in the forenoon that they were favored with another visit from their keeper, and he came then to announce to them conditions upon which they would be released.

They were to be allowed to depart at once if they would promise to tell no one where they had been detained, and not to identify either of the men who had put them there, should they ever be called upon to do so. The comrades took the whole thing into consideration, and finally agreed to the terms; and when they had solemnly made the promises they were allowed to go.

CHAPTER VII.

SURPRISES AND A COMPACT.

"Hully gee!" exclaimed Larry, as they walked away from the place.

"Say it once for me, too," said Fritz.

"That was what I think about it, anyhow."

"I'll say it twice fer you and once for myself, how will that do?" rejoined Larry. "I am too surprised to say anything else just now. I didn't expect to git out of limbo that easy."

"No, you yust bet not. There was something funny about that, Larry."

"That is what there is, Fritzey boy. But, then, what else could they do with us, when you come to look at it? They wouldn't be likely to kill us, I don't imagine. No; they think we will keep our promise, and if we don't, then look out. They have said that much."

"Yaw, that was right; they kill us then, pooty quick, maybe."

"Just as maybe as not, Fritzey boy."

"Well, are we going to keep us those promises, Larry? Or shall we tell the polices?"

"We'll keep 'em, Fritzey, you bet. What is a feller's word good for if he won't keep it after giving it as sollum as we did? We'll keep it, but we will find some way to square the 'count, you bet."

"Well, I suppose you knows, Larry. It been none of our business, anyhow, and that was what we got for poking our noses into it. What we do now? We go us home, hey, ain't it? Our mothers have the polices out after us if we don't show up quick."

"That is a square chunk of sense Fritzey. We'll go home first, and then we'll hustle around and find Charley Hart."

"What for?"

"To tell him, of course."

"I thought you wouldn't tell nobody 'bout it."

"Not what we promised not to tell; but we can tell all the rest, can't we?"

"Yaw, yaw, that was so, Larry. You have got brains, as I always said you had. We get them yet where the hair is short, you yust bet we will. What you say, hey?"

"That is it."

They were hurrying along, eager to reach home with as little loss of time as possible when whom should they meet but Charley Hart.

The reporter had just come from the place for which he was heading at the time when we last took leave of him, and on seeing the two "devils" approaching, as dirty as they had been on leaving the office in the small hours of the morning, he stopped short.

"What are you two doing here?" he demanded. "Have you been working extra time? What is up?"

"You are just the feller we want to see, Charley," cried Larry, gladly. "We meant to hunt you up as soon as we had gone home and told the folks we are alive."

"Yes, but what is it? Am I wanted at the office?"

"No, you ain't wanted, but we have got a chunk of news for you—though mebbey it ain't news by this time. Say, was there a man found laid out down on — Street this mornin'?"

"Yes, and—"

"Of course. No need for me to ask ye that at all, fer we know it. Didn't the police almost nab me and Fritzey for it—"

"You and Fritz?"

"Yaw, that was right," said Fritz.

"See here," cried Hart, eagerly, "do you know who that man was?"

"We didn't take time to get much of a look at him, and mebbey wouldn't knowed him if we had."

"Well, that man was Joel Hungerfort, and—"

"Hully gee!"

"Yes; and the town is all afire with the new sensation. Can it be that you have not heard about it?"

"How do you think we could hear about it, and we in limbo clean up to our chins?"

"In limbo—what do you mean?"

"Mean just that. Ther two fellers captured us and locked us up, and we have only just now got away. Oh! I tell you, we have been in it."

"Bet your shirt we have!" cried Fritz.

"See here," said Charley, with excitement, "it is plain that you boys hold the key to the mystery that is turning New York all upside down. You are a pair of veritable Broadway Billys."

"Only wish we were," said Larry.

"I tell you you are, and if you have got a clew to this thing—as, of course, you have, and will give it to me, I will give you a share of the reward if I earn it."

"That is just what we wanted to find you for," declared Larry.

"Come along, then, and we will talk as we walk. Tell me all about the affair—everything you know."

This Larry did, giving all the points as he knew them, finally winding up with the terms of his and Fritz's release; and at that statement the reporter stopped short in his walk.

"You don't mean to say you have closed the door like that, do you?" he demanded.

"What else could we do?" asked Larry.

"Well, that is so; but it is galling to come so close to a clew and not be able to get hold of it after all."

"No matter, we know other things that we can tell, and maybe that will be enough to put you on the track of the fellows so you can round them up and win the thousand."

"Else maybe it better was that we spit out and tell the whole business, ain't it?" suggested Fritz again. "They was only rascals anyhow— But, that won't never do, for Larry has said so. Besides, they will kill us if we do; they said they would."

"You could well enough risk the killing part of it, my lads," said Hart, "but as you have given your word of honor not to tell certain things, that settles it. When you make a promise, keep it; that is a golden rule to live by. Then men will know that your word is to be depended on, every time. But, it is most exasperating, nevertheless."

They went on, the reporter in a thoughtful mood.

"It seems too bad to keep such a clew locked up, with so much at stake, and I know that Billy Stevens would call us fools for doing it, if he came to know of it," he presently said. "Are you going to tell him?"

"No; we have told you," said Larry.

"Because, if you do, he will get it out of you in spite of yourselves. If you will agree not to tell him, I tell you what I will do."

"What is that?"

"Tell me what else you can, everything that you have not promised to tell, and if I win the reward I will give you a hundred dollars apiece out of it."

"Hully gee! We'll do that, glad enough, hey, Fritzey boy?"

"You bet," said Fritz.

"It's a bargain, then. Now, the things that you are not to tell are two only, if I understand it right: You are not to tell the place where you were held, and you are not to identify the two men, if called on to do that?"

"That is the whole thing," said Larry.

"Very well. Now, the thing you can tell is the place where the girl was left—that is to say, the street and number."

"Yes, that is so, sure enough. It was No. —, — Street."

Hart made note of the address.

"That is a good starter," he said, returning his notebook to his pocket. "The only thing I ask of you is that you will not let Billy in."

"What do you take us for?" cried Larry. "We have made a bargain with you, Charley, and we won't go back on it, hey, Fritzey boy?"

"That was what's the matter," agreed Fritz.

A few words further, then, in which the lads told all they could, and after an understanding with the reporter they hastened homeward, while Charley Hart went in the direction of the address they had given him, to work up a "scoop."

CHAPTER VIII.

CHARLEY SEEKS A CLEW.

There was now a new spring to the reporter's step.

Nothing so stimulating to the blood of a newspaper man as the prospect of securing a sensation, to say nothing of the chance of making a "scoop" and winning a reward.

"I am on the right track at last," Charley said to himself, as he hastened along. "Thanks to those two lads, I have now a clew to the mystery, and it will be my fault if I do not work it out. I would like to do it, just to top Billy for once."

He ran the matter over in mind, thinking of all the lads had told him.

If they had only been at liberty to tell where they had been imprisoned, then he would have something to work upon.

In due course he reached the house before which the carriage had stopped in the small hours of that morning, where the girl had been left, and where Larry and Fritz were captured.

He walked past, taking a good survey of the front as he did so, and saw nothing out of the ordinary, of course.

On reaching the corner he crossed over and returned.

When he came to the house he ran up the steps and pulled the bell, and in a few minutes the door was opened to him.

"Your pardon," he said, "but is this a lodging house?"

"No, sir," was the short response.

"Ah! Then I have made a mistake, perhaps. Will you kindly tell me who lives here?"

His manner was so urbane that a refusal on the part of the woman who had opened the door was not to be thought of, if she was at all susceptible to "blarney."

"This is the residence of Mr. Hugh McCasket, sir," she answered.

"McCasket? That certainly is not the name of the party I was referred to, and yet I am sure this was the street and number. There must have been a mistake made, I think."

"It looks so, sir."

Charley did not feel like giving up, and yet he did not see his way clear, on the spur of the moment, for further parley.

He did some quick thinking, even while the woman was making her brief response. He saw no other way than to come right to the point of the business that had brought him there.

"Strange, too," he said, "for this is certainly the house to which the child was brought at an early hour this morning."

He noted that the woman gave a slight start.

She was evidently a servant, but she seemed a degree above the average of door servants in intelligence.

"What are you talking about, sir?" she asked.

"About the child that was brought here this morning. A man carried her into the house, and she was left here."

"I think you must be crazy, sir. There was no child brought here this morning, sir. You certainly are making a great mistake now. I think I had better call Mr. McCasket, sir."

"Ah! I wish you would, if he is at home," said Charley, quickly.

He had stepped into the hall so that the woman could not close the door upon him, and he noted that there was suspicion in her mind.

"I think he is at home; I will see," she said.

She motioned to a settee with which the hall was furnished, and hastened away.

"I am sorry, sir," she said, "but I find that Mr. McCasket is not at home. I thought he was, sir."

"Then I will see Mrs. McCasket."

"There is no Mrs. McCasket, sir."

"Ah! His wife is dead, then?"

"He never had one, sir."

"Then you are his housekeeper?"

"Yes."

"I understand. If a child had been brought here you would certainly know about it, that being the case."

"Undoubtedly, sir."

"And you assert that no such thing was done?"

"No child was brought here, sir. If you have been so informed, some one has fooled you."

"You would be willing that I should search the house?"

"Sir!"

"Did you not understand me?"

"I understand you only too well, sir. I will be pleased if you will make your stay short."

"Which I shall have to do, if you request it, I suppose. But if there is a mistake, and there seems to be, have you heard of anything of that kind near here?"

"No, sir."

"A slight mistake in the number would make a great deal of difference, you see."

"It might have happened right next door, and never be known in this house, sir. I know nothing about it, and if you will kindly allow me to show you out—"

"Certainly, madam."

He bowed and withdrew, having no power to remain longer, save by force.

"Well, I have made a mess of that," he said to himself, as he walked away. "I am no detective, that is positive. I wonder how much better Billy Stevens could have done."

And then he fell to reasoning the matter.

By the action of the woman—he did not call into question the correctness of the information the two lads had given him—he was sure that she had been prepared for just such an interview.

The two boys had been held captive long enough for the girl to be removed from the house, and perhaps that had been done. The men were safe enough in releasing them, that being the case. Even supposing they broke their parole and told everything they could, it would amount to nothing.

No doubt the rascals had covered their tracks so effectually that, should the comrades lead the police to the very house where they had been imprisoned, they would be denied.

And, in the event of that, what could they prove?

Nothing.

All these things, and many more, the reporter turned over in his mind as he hastened along, and his chagrin was great that he had been unable to accomplish anything at the house he had just visited.

Not a single thing—but, hold on! What about the name of the man who was said to reside there, the Mr. McCasket?

That name had been spoken by the woman before her suspicions were aroused by what followed, and the information had, no doubt, been straight. That being the case, it remained only to find Mr. Hugh McCasket.

Again Charley's step took on its light, springy characteristic, as his blood, so to say, was stimulated again on finding that he had not called altogether in vain at the house to which the comrades had directed him, and he believed that he had picked up a clew after all.

CHAPTER IX.

DR. GRAVES TALKS.

Meantime, what of Billy Stevens, and the secret he was on the point of hearing at the closing of a preceding chapter?

Dr. Graves had just invited his attention, promising to reveal to him something about the Hungerfort family that was not known generally—in fact, that was a secret.

"You have my attention, sir," Billy said, in response to the doctor's last-quoted remark.

"What I am about to tell you, sir, is something that you positively must not make use of in your paper. But, I have your word as to that; so I will not remind you on that score further. What I have to tell you is this:

"Mrs. Elizabeth Hungerfort was not the real child of those who were supposed to be her parents, but an adopted daughter. Her real parents were not known, and at the time of her marriage this secret was held back from Mr. Hungerfort, as it was feared that he might find in it an objection to wedding the lady.

"Elizabeth herself did not know the truth, but believed herself to be the child of Mr. and Mrs. Henry Whitland, her adopted parents—she does not know it even yet, and there is no reason why she should at this late day. You will understand why I desire that it be kept from Mr. Hungerfort. Having been kept so long, it is needless to make it known now."

"I see. But, what importance do you attach to it, sir? In what way can it have to do with the present mystery?"

"Ah! that is the mystery itself, Mr. Stevens. If I could answer that question, no need to call you in to aid me. That is what I want you to find out, and see if it has any bearing upon the case."

"You suspect that the real parentage of the lady has something to do with it?"

"It may be so."

"Yet you have no knowledge who her parents were?"

"No, sir."

"Mr. and Mrs. Whitland must know, certainly."

"They are both dead."

"Ah! that puts us in a bad situation, then, certainly. I do not see just how we are going to make anything out of the information, sir."

"Nevertheless, it is a fact for you to work upon, privately, and, having the knowledge, it will be of service to you if anything turns up to point in the same direction."

"Well, I accept it, but I don't know what I am going to do with it."

"Neither do I, sir, but you can do more with it than I could, it is altogether likely."

"Were the Whitlands dead at the time of the lady's marriage to Hungerfort?"

"Mr. Whitland was not."

"And he, then, was the one who deceived Mr. Hungerfort?"

"Yes."

"And with the object you have stated! Well, I suppose it was natural, under the circumstances, though it was hardly fair to either party. But how came you to know anything about it?"

"I was family physician to the Whitlands."

"What had that to do with it?"

"Mrs. Whitland told me when she was in her last illness."

"Why did she tell you?"

"I do not know that; you know a person expecting death at any moment is likely to tell things long kept secret."

"No, I did not know it; don't see why they should, unless there was something to be gained by so doing. What reason did she advance for telling you the secret?"

"She loved the girl, and had always longed to know more about her parentage."

"And so came to speak about it?"

"Exactly."

"Was she a party to keeping the knowledge from the girl and from Mr. Hungerfort?"

"From the girl, yes. She died some years before the marriage, and so had no opportunity to take any part in that deception. She did not tell the girl for her peace of mind, since it could have done no good, and would have only made her unhappy."

"And she exacted no promise of any kind from you, doctor?"

"Well—um—yes; that is to say, she requested me, should the truth ever come to my notice, and the young lady was found to be of honest parentage, to tell her some time the secret of that parentage. She did not think it fair to leave her always in ignorance."

"And you promised?"

"Yes; although I would never have told, nor would I have let it out now under any other circumstances. I tell you, as I told the detective, with the hope that it might be useful as a means of clearing up the mystery and restoring the lady to her home. That is all there is of it. What do you think about the matter?"

"Well, I do not believe that it has any bearing upon the present case at all, sir."

"You do not?"

"No, sir. In the first place, you are quite evidently the only one who knew anything about it, and in the next place, it is so simple a matter that nothing could come of it even if made known, further than the passing indignation of Mr. Hungerfort, perhaps; and certainly he could not blame his wife in the matter, she being innocent of all knowledge."

"Well, well, I do not pretend to know, I am sure, but I do hope that you can clear the matter up."

"You said you are a close friend to Mr. Hungerfort?"

"So I am, sir."

"Yet you never told him of this matter, eh?"

"For the same reason that Mrs. Whitland never told it to her adopted daughter. It would give pain without doing anybody any good."

"Yes, I can see that you are right in

that, doctor. Well, it does not strike me that this can have had anything to do with the disappearance of Mrs. Hungerfort, and unless you can open my eyes further in that regard, I am inclined to attach no importance to the secret."

"I said only that it might have bearing upon it, sir. Nothing but my desire to help my friend would have induced me to expose the matter; so, do not forget your pledge to me."

"I certainly shall not forget, Dr. Graves."

The remainder of their conversation was of no interest, and in a little while the reporter took leave.

CHAPTER X.

LARRY AND FRITZ IN TROUBLE.

At their usual hour that evening Larry and Fritz set out from home for their work.

Both lived in the same house, and Larry had been the means of getting Fritz employment in the "Herald-Record" office. They were almost inseparable, and were sometimes called "the twins."

Their nearest route to the "Herald-Record" building took them through a rather "shady" neighborhood. Of this they thought nothing, however, being accustomed to it.

They were hastening along, talking over their adventure of that morning and wondering how Charley Hart had made out working up the clew they had given him, paying no attention to their surroundings or to persons they met or passed.

Of a sudden, in the very darkest part of the street through which they were passing, they were suddenly seized from behind.

"Hully gee!" was all Larry had time to gasp, and a hand was clapped over his mouth so that it was impossible for him to make any outcry.

It was the same with Fritz; he had started to shout, but his mouth was closed before the sound had risen half way to his lips. And there they were, in a worse fix than the one from which they had been liberated that morning!

"Don't yer peep!" warned a rough voice, in a whisper, "'case ef yer do, it will be yer last one, I'm tellin' yer. Have ye got that 'n, Pete?"

"You bet I have got him, Ruba-bube."

"Fetch him along, then, and be quick about it, 'fore we run up against one of ther finest. Right this way with him!"

With quick strides they hustled the two hapless "devils" into a near-by alley, and along that to a building in the rear, then into that building, and down a flight of rickety stairs that made threatening protest under the heavy weight.

At the bottom of the stairs they were in total darkness, but the men were evidently well acquainted with the place.

They had first gone some distance along a hall, to reach the stairs, which descended in the direction by which they had entered the building, and now at the bottom they passed further to the rear of the house, if not indeed beyond its confines entirely.

It was a damp, foul-smelling place, which did not lessen in any degree the terror the comrades felt.

A moment or two, and they came to a door.

Light could be seen under the door as they approached it, and one of the men giving the door a kick, it was promptly opened to them, and a man wearing a mask stood before them.

"Ha! you have got them, I see!" he cried, joyfully.

"You bet we have got 'em," the response.

"Lucky fellows! How did you work it?"

"Why, we found out where they lived, and follered them when they set out fer work; that was how."

"Dead easy," muttered the other fellow.

By this time Larry recognized the voice of the masked man. The man was one of the two of their former adventure.

"Well, close the door and bring them over here," the man ordered.

He led the way to the far end of the room, which looked more like a vault than a room. At some time or other in its history it had perhaps been a wine storage room.

The fellow called by the unheard-of name of Ruba-bube closed the door with his foot, and, still holding fast to Fritz, followed Pete to the other end of the place, where the man in the mask had dropped upon a chair by a table, and was awaiting them.

His mask, by the way, was only a bit of cloth held in place by his hat, and for temporary use only, quite evidently.

"Release them," he ordered. "They can't get away; if one of them attempts it, just cut him a swipe that he will remember."

"You bet!" said the fellow Pete.

Thereupon Larry and Fritz were freed. Larry had had time to get his nerve steadied.

"Hully gee!" he exclaimed. "What fer a s'prise party is this, anyhow?"

"It was all surprises, maybe, ain't it?" chipped in Fritz, eager to hold his end up.

"A nice pair of boys you are, now ain't you?" said the masked man, in a sneering tone of voice. "A fine pair of fellows to stick to your word."

"We ain't broke no word," said Larry.

"Oh! indeed; haven't you, though?"

"No, we ain't. Ask my comrade here if that ain't so."

"That is more as so," declared Fritz, eager to make it as emphatic as he could.

"Yes, I guess it is," sneered the man in the mask. "Where are the promises you made when you were allowed to go this morning?"

"We have kept 'em," declared Larry.

"Yes, you have!"

"Honest."

"What is the use of your lying to me, when I know better?"

"I ain't lyin' to ye, sir, never a word I ain't. Ask Fritzey boy if that ain't Gospel fack, every word."

"Yaw, so it was," Fritz supported.

"You hold your tongue," growled the man. "One of you lies and the other swears to it. What is the good of that? Do you know what is goin' to happen to you here?"

"No, sir," answered Larry.

"Well, you are going to stay here for an indefinite period, that is what is going to happen. We gave you a fair trial, but you did not keep your promise, and you see what has come of it."

"Honest Injun, we have kept our word," insisted Larry, urgently. "We ain't breathed a single letter of what we said we wouldn't tell."

"Why will you persist in lying?"

"I ain't lyin'—"

"Pshaw! you weary me! Let me hear no more of it. In the first place, you fell in with a reporter on the 'Herald-Record,' or whatever the sheet is called, and what did he do right on top of that?"

"Give it up," replied Larry.

"I'll tell you: He went straightway to a certain house, and from there, presently, straight to another house, and if you did not put him onto the whole thing how would he know anything about it?"

"But, we didn't! Honest, we—"

"Pish! You had fair warning what would happen if you broke your word with us, and it is going to happen."

"I tell you, we didn't!" cried Larry, showing anger. "We didn't let out a thing that we promised not to tell. All we did tell was about the carriage and what—"

"Go on, go on; I am eager to have you proceed."

"Well, and the house where you left the girl, that was all, sir, every word. And we don't mean to tell any more, either. Let us go, or we shall be late to our work and get the bounce."

"What care I what you get! If you said that much, it was more than enough, for we told Sam to make you promise to say nothing whatever, and he reported to us that you had done so. But, no matter, not a bit; you are a pair of dangerous fellows to have at large, just now, and we are going to take care of you."

The man had risen, while speaking, and he gave a signal as he did so.

Instantly the two comrades were seized again, and their two ruffianly captors stood ready to obey any order that was given, evidently.

They were a brace of tough-looking customers, with about as brutal faces as Larry and Fritz had ever looked upon in their lives, and no wonder that the comrades trembled as they waited to hear their sentence pronounced.

CHAPTER XI.

CHARLEY VISITS McCASKETS.

We left Charley Hart on the point of following a clew he had just struck.

If he could find Hugh McCasket he would learn something more concerning the mystery with which McCasket's house was now, to a certain degree, identified.

But where to find him as the question. He blamed himself for not having thought of the idea sooner.

"Well, there is no use fretting about it now," he decided; "the best thing I can do is to give this tip to the best professional I know of, and let him handle it. But that will not do. The paper wants the credit of solving the mystery! No! I must go it alone—give away no clews or points."

McCasket—McCasket—he had surely heard that name before, but where?

The more he thought of it, the more it impressed him that it had been in connection with something of a sporting nature.

If that were so, there was an easy way of finding out—he could go and inquire of the sporting editor of the Herald-Record, who was a handy encyclopedia of everything in that line, and had more names at his tongue's end than any other man in the city, perhaps.

Accordingly, he set out to find Mr. Hardiston.

He was still thinking hard upon the matter, however, and ere long he brought it all to mind and did not have to carry out his intention.

The time, the place, the event, all came vividly back to his mind, and he required no assistance in the matter. It remained to be seen, however, whether this McCasket would prove to be the one he wanted to find or not.

He recalled a billiard match that had come off some months before, in which sporting characters had shown more or

less interest, and he recalled that it had taken place at the rooms of the Pony Club, and that McCasket was the owner of the building and sort of fatherly patron of the club.

Changing his direction immediately, he set out at a brisk pace for the Pony Club.

He was not long in reaching there.

Nor was he making any mistake, for this was the place where Larry and Fritz had been detained.

It was, as we have elsewhere stated, a club that was kept open all night long, and McCasket was owner of the building and chief mogul of the whole institution.

Not a noted resort, yet it was well known among a certain class, and it without doubt had a place in the mental archives of the sporting editor of the Herald-Record. Charley believed that if he wanted any particular information concerning the place he could get it from that source.

Reaching the clubhouse, he entered the public room, which was a saloon having almost the appearance of a drawing room.

Charley had been there only once, and so it was not to his discredit that he had not brought it immediately to mind.

He entered with all the ease of an habitue, and stepping to the bar he called for a cigar, selecting a good one and paying a good price for it.

Though a stranger there, he had standing immediately.

"Looking for somebody, sir?" the man at the bar asked.

"Well, yes; but wouldn't know him if I saw him," answered Charley in a matter-of-fact way.

"Stranger to you, eh? Maybe I can be of use to you, sir."

"Maybe you can. I was just going to ask you. Where does Mr. McCasket live?"

The man gave the address promptly, and Charley could have shaken hands with himself on the spot. It was the very house and the very McCasket!

"Is he here just now?"

"No; he does not happen to be in."

"Do you think I would find him at his house if I went there?"

"That is hard to say, sir. The most likely place to see him is right here. He is in more time than he is out, sir. So you had better wait, sir. Anything I can do for you?"

Charley's appearance and manner won him respect.

"Well, I hardly know," he made response. "This is the headquarters of a club, is it not?"

"Yes, the Pony Club it is called."

"That is it. And this is the place where a billiard match took place a few months ago."

"Yes, this is the place, sir. Shinner and Ruddy were the players, and Ruddy won the match and took a pile of money for his backers. That was a busy week for me, sir."

"Not a doubt of it. I find that I am on the right track. Can you tell me where Ruddy is now?"

Charley had heard the sporting editor say he was in England.

"No, I don't know, sir."

"Do you think McCasket could tell me? That is one of the things I intend to ask him."

"I have not the slightest doubt of it, sir. He is posted on all such matters, and can give pointers to anybody on anything in the sporting way, almost."

Charley felt thankful that his work was not in the sporting line just at that time, or he might have been one of the "chaps."

"I think I will wait for him," he said. "You have a fine place here."

"Yes, we are not ashamed of it."

"But not very busy at this time of day."

"No, this is our dullest hour, generally."

"What sort of organization is the Pony Club you mentioned?"

"It is a sporting club, sir, and—well, the members do a little private playing."

"What kind of men belong to it? Are they solid men? That is, I might make some effort to get in, as a visitor, if they are a good class of citizens, you understand."

"There is none better, sir. I have heard Mr. McCasket say, and for that matter I know it myself, that we have some of the very best men in the city here as members. If you would like a little play, in a fair and square manner with honest men, this is the place to find it."

"Do you think I could get in?"

"Not a doubt if it, if you can hit it off right with McCasket. He is the head of the concern."

"He must be quite a popular fellow, then."

"Yes, he is."

"I shall have to try to hit it off with him, as you call it, and see if I can't get inside."

"You are a stranger here, then, I take. Hello! here is Mr. McCasket himself. I did not think you would have long to wait, sir. He is coming right this way."

Charley looked and saw a tall, dark man with drooping black mustache, approaching, a big diamond gleaming on his shirt.

"This gentleman has been waiting to see you, sir," said the man at the bar, and with a wave of the hand he drew back and left the field to his employer, who surveyed Charley with a pair of cold, keen eyes.

"You wanted to see me?"

"If you are Mr. Hugh McCasket, sir."

"That is my name. Let us go into my private room, Mr. —"

"My name is Charles Hart, sir. I am a native of St. Louis, but am at present stopping in New York."

All of which was true enough.

They shook hands, and Mr. McCasket led the way into the private apartment just off the main room.

CHAPTER XII.

RAISING A TEMPEST.

"Now," said Mr. McCasket, when they had taken seats, "What is it you want, Mr. Hart? What can I do for you?"

"I came here to make some inquiries," answered Charley. "One thing I will ask you, can you tell me anything about Ruddy, the billiardist?"

"Yes, I think I can, sir."

"Where is he at present?"

"In England."

"So much for that, then. While I was talking with your man at the bar he informed me that a fine club have their rooms here in your building, and that you are the chief member of that club. Would it be possible for me to gain admittance as a visitor, do you think?"

"What's your object?"

"Well, your man hinted at some fair and square games that are carried on, and it struck me that—"

"He has altogether too much to say to men he does not know. I shall attend to him for it when I have time. Are you acquainted with any of the members of the club?"

"That is impossible for me to say, sir."

"Why so?"
"Because, I do not know who are members of the club."
"Ah! that is true enough, how could you know? Well, what is your business, Mr. Hart?"

"I am connected with a newspaper, sir."

"Ha! that may help you out, then, and no doubt we can make the arrangement all right for you. Know any newspaper man in town?"

"Yes."

"Know the sporting editor of the Herald-Record?"

"Yes, I know Mr. Hardiston quite well, sir. If he is a member of the club, I am all right."

"Well, he is; and so is Billy Stevens, if you are acquainted with him. A live reporter, is Billy, and bound to have everything that's going, no matter how he gets it."

"A reporter has to be up in the morning, Mr. McCasket."

"Not to be gainsayed, sir. Well, there will be no question about your gaining admittance into our club any time you want to come; just a line from Mr. Hardiston will do it."

"And I can get that with no trouble."

Charley realized that he was not gaining what he really desired to know, and saw that he must make a new tack.

Their talk ran along commonplace for a few minutes, the reporter careful to make no misstatements and also to say nothing that would prematurely reveal his hand.

He had been bearing the talk in the direction of recent sensations, telling how certain reporters had made scoops for their papers, and presently the talk came to the desired point—mention of the Hungerfort mystery, which was the chief topic of conversation anyhow.

McCasket was the one to bring it up, and Charley was an attentive listener.

"I have heard about it, of course," he said. "I was in hope that you had some theory to advance, Mr. McCasket."

"No, I leave all that for the detectives," said the proprietor of the clubhouse. "It is one of the strangest things that ever happened in New York, I think."

"It undoubtedly is, if report is to be believed. And what you have just told me about the missing child, and the finding of Mr. Hungerfort insensible on the sidewalk,—there was no mention of that in the papers this morning. You are ahead of the press."

"It will be in all the evening papers. It was too late for publication in the morning edition."

"Yes, so it was. And speaking of reporters and detectives, I happen to know of a clew that one of them is working upon, Mr. McCasket."

"You do?"

"Yes. It seems that there were witnesses to that scene, the striking of Mr. Hungerfort and the carrying away of the child, and those witnesses have told where the child was taken to."

McCasket gave a slight start.

"You don't say," he remarked. "If that is the case, they ought soon to be getting down to the bottom of the matter."

"It would look so. It seems the child was taken to No. — street, and left there, and I believe some attention is about to be paid to that house."

The reporter noticed that McCasket was moving uneasily, although he was trying not to have it noticed.

"How did you learn this?" he asked.

"Through some one who knows about it," was the answer.

"Who was it?"

"Sorry, but it would be a breach of confidence, were I to tell you, sir. I beg "Do you know what I believe?"

McCasket sat upright and gave the table a thump with his fist.

"No, I cannot know what you believe, sir," was the response. "Have you a suspicion regarding the affair?"

"No; but I have a suspicion respecting you," with a louder blow upon the table, and his black eyes flashed menacingly. "I suspect that you are a detective yourself."

"I can assure you truthfully that I am nothing of the kind," said the reporter, quietly.

"Then you are a reporter, by Judas!"

"Well, I must admit that; nor have I deceived you. I told you I was a newspaper man."

"And you have gotten hold of a clew that no other man in this city has gotten hold of, I am sure of that. What do you expect to do with it, now that you have got it?"

Charley had been thinking rapidly.

Would it do to show his hand, and let McCasket know just what he knew?

He decided quickly that he would do just that thing, let come what might of it, and he said:

"I will tell you what I want to do with it, Mr. McCasket. I am after the thousand dollars reward offered by the 'Herald-Record,' and I mean to win it if I can."

McCasket's eyes flashed, and a shade of pallor came into his face.

"You do, eh?" he said.

"Yes, if it is in me, I do, and can you blame me?"

"Not a bit; wish you luck at it. But I do not like the manner in which you have lied to me."

"I have not lied to you, sir. Every statement I have made to you is true. I am a native of St. Louis, just as I told you, and for the present am stopping in New York."

"Well, how do you purpose going about the task of solving the mystery by the clew you have picked up?"

"Perhaps you will not be unwilling to aid me."

Charley was holding back the fact that he knew it was McCasket's own residence that they were talking of.

"No, sir, it is out of my line," was the response. "And that reminds me, I have an appointment, Mr. Hart, that I must keep. I must ask you to excuse me; I must be off."

"Certainly, sir; sorry if I have detained you."

Both rose at the same moment.

"I might say further, sir," Charley added, "that I happen to know that the house in question is your own residence, and it follows that you must know something about the Hungerfort mystery. Perhaps you had rather give me an interview than have me write it up my own way for the paper."

"See here, young man," and McCasket turned upon him fiercely, "if you mention my name in any connection with this affair you will live to regret it, mark what I tell you." And, so saying, he abruptly left the room, and the black look upon his face showed trembling employes that he was in a dark mood, as he passed swiftly out to the street.

CHAPTER XIII.

BILLY ON THE SAME TRAIL.

When Billy Stevens left the office of Dr. Graves he was in a puzzled frame of mind.

He was puzzled to know why Dr. Graves had made such a revelation to

him concerning Mrs. Hungerfort. It did not seem possible that the secret of her birth could have anything to do with the present matter.

The fact was in his possession, but of what use was it to him? He considered that it had been but a waste of time, his conversation with the doctor, and he was at loss concerning the mystery he was so eager to solve. He wondered where Charley Hart was, and what he was doing.

Running the matter over in mind, as he had already done a hundred times, trying to get hold of something that would lead to the solution of the problem, he was paying little attention to where he was going, having no objective point in view.

Suddenly he came face to face with a man he knew, and stopped short with a cheery hail, extending his hand.

"Hello, McCasket!" he greeted.

It was the proprietor of the club house, shortly after his interview with Charley Hart.

He stopped, but the usual smile of recognition did not appear upon his face. Instead, his frown deepened, and he did not notice the proffered hand at all.

Billy changed color and looked confused.

"Well?" McCasket demanded.

"What is the matter, old fellow?" Billy inquired.

"Matter enough, confound it! You can't play me for a sucker, so do not try it."

At that Billy Stevens flushed, and his eyes flashed.

"Who is trying to play you?" he demanded. "Seems to me you are jumping onto me before you know what you are talking about."

"I know well enough what I am talking about."

"Well, I do not, and I demand to know the meaning of this coldness toward me."

"You do, eh?"

"Yes, I do."

"Well, I do not feel disposed to tell you. I have had enough of reporters for one day."

Billy saw that something was in the wind, and he was not the man to let it pass without an effort to learn something more about it, whatever it might be.

"You puzzle me, McCasket," he said. "If some one else has been fooling with you, that is no reason that you should go for me in this way, far as I can see. What is it, anyhow?"

"No matter what it is. I tell you I have had enough of your kind for one day. Do you understand that?"

"See here, did I ever go back on you?"

"Well, no."

"Have I ever published anything about you that you could kick about?"

"Well, no, you never did."

"Unless to remind you that it has not been because I could not have done so, however. You are not using me quite right, McCasket."

"Well, if you were in the frame of mind I am in at this minute, you would act about as I do, or worse, perhaps. I am willing to talk with you as a friend, if you will promise not to report it."

McCasket extended his hand.

Billy took it, for it was business policy with him to overlook the snub he had received.

"I'll promise anything you want me to," said Billy. "You have given me a good many tips since I have known you, and I can afford to oblige you in this way once in a while."

"That is more like it."

"Well, then, what's the matter?"

"Let's walk along, and I'll tell you."
 "All right. I am agreeable to that; I have nothing to do."

So they went down the street side by side, Billy having turned about with McCasket.

"I have been taken in by one of your Herald-Record men," McCasket complained.

"The deuce you have!"

"Yes."

"Who was it?"

"He called himself Hart."

"Charley Hart! Is that so? I did not think it was in him to fool a man of your caliber, McCasket."

"I didn't think so myself."

"What was it about? You might as well tell me the whole story now."

"That is something I can't do, Billy. It is a mess that I am tangled up in, and I have got to get out of it."

"Maybe I could help you out."

"Can't trust you."

"Can't trust me!"

"No. All your interests are the other way, or would be, if you knew all about it. Confound it, I am saying a good deal too much as it is."

He was not saying half enough to suit Billy Stevens.

Billy knew that something was in the wind, and something of importance, whatever it might be.

The first thing that popped into his head was the Hungerfort mystery, for that was the one thing of importance that Charley was working on, and his regular duties did not take him to places like McCasket's.

"My interests would be the other way?" he repeated. "What interest could I have in a matter that I know nothing about?"

"The same interest that other fellow has, confound him!"

"I don't see it that way."

"Well, I do, then. You are both on the same paper, and the Herald-Record is bound to have every sensation it can get hold of."

"Then this is something new?"

"Yes."

"Look here, McCasket, you had better trust me in the matter. If it is really something that will hurt you if it appears, I can see Hart and maybe can induce him to let it drop."

"No, I don't believe you can, Billy. The best thing to do is to let it drop right where it is, and I will take steps to clear my own skirts of the matter."

"All right, if you say so; but I am willing to do anything I can to help you, if you will only give me an idea what it is I can do for you."

"No, no; there is nothing you can do, Billy."

"That settles it, then."

"The fact of the business is, Billy, I gave the fellow a fair warning not to mention my name in any way, shape, or manner, or he would suffer the consequence if he did, and if he has got any sense at all he will let it drop. I'll keep my word, I swear I will!"

"That is a warning for me, too, I take it."

"I would not hesitate one second about telling you the same, if I thought it was necessary."

"Yes, I can well believe that."

McCasket came to a stop.

"I shall have to ask you to excuse me, Billy," he said. "I have got some important business to attend to, and will leave you here. There is one little thing you can do for me, if you are willing."

"Name it."

"If you see that fellow Hart, just tell him the kind of man that I am, one who

keeps his word to the letter, with friend and foe alike."

"It will give me pleasure to do so, I assure you, and I will induce him to drop the matter, if that be possible, since I know that is your wish. I take it that it is something that might hurt the good name of your place."

"It would do it no good."

"All right, old fellow, I will do what I can toward hushing it up, whatever it may be, for we must protect the good name of the Pony Club, you know. I won't detain you longer." And with a cheery wave of the hand Billy turned away. The expression of his face changed instantly.

CHAPTER XIV.

RIVALS RUN COUNTER.

Billy Stevens looked more puzzled than ever.

It was patent that something of importance was in the wind.

That it was something in connection with the Hungerfort matter he felt almost certain.

Just what it could be, however, was more than he was able to fathom. He did not see what possible connection McCasket could have with that case, and yet it must be that.

"What the mischief is it?" he asked himself. "It is something of more than ordinary importance, that is certain, or it would not have cut McCasket up so," he reflected. "I guess I will go around to his place, and maybe I will stumble onto it."

Accordingly he set his face in the direction of the club house.

It did not take him long to reach there, and although he had been turning the matter over in mind all the way, he was no nearer a solution.

He was recognized as soon as he entered.

"Hello, Billy!" the man at the bar called out.

"How are you, Ted?" was the response. "What is the news?"

"That is what you always want to know, the first thing. Don't know any."

"It is business with me, Ted, you know. Where is McCasket this time of day, do you know?"

"No; don't know where he is, Billy. He went out of here in a huff a little while ago, and I don't know where he went nor when he will be back."

"Went off in a huff?"

"Yes."

"What was the matter?"

"That is just what I would like to know."

"Maybe there is some news in the wind that would make a readable item, Ted."

"Very likely. But I don't know what it is. A stranger came here to see him, and whatever he had to say cut McCasket all up."

"A stranger, you say?"

"Yes."

Billy thought rapidly. Perhaps Ted did not know Charley Hart. He would ascertain.

"Sorry that I was not a little sooner; might have learned something worth reporting; but, since I am too late, let it pass. By the way, have you seen anything of Charley Hart?"

"Charley Hart?"

"Yes."

"Don't know him."

"You don't? Why, he is one of the Herald-Record boys."

"No; don't know him, Billy. What sort of a looking fellow is he? Maybe I have seen him."

As Billy had so recently seen Charley,

he could describe him closely, and before he had done the man at the bar exclaimed:

"Why, that's the very chap!"

"What chap?"

"The one that was here to see McCasket."

That was the point Billy wanted settled, and he congratulated himself on the ruse.

"You don't tell me so!" he exclaimed.

"Then I must see Charley, for it is certain that something has gone crooked with McCasket, leaving here as you say he did."

"No mistake about that part of it, Billy."

"And you say you have no idea what it can be?"

"Not the least."

"You heard nothing said?"

"Nothing but what the fellow had to say to me before McCasket came in."

"What was that, then? Anything will be of interest, you know, where there is news at stake."

Ted repeated the leading points in the talk he had had with Charley Hart, or Charley with him, and Billy gave close attention, and could not but compliment his confrere.

He was certain now that something of importance was in the wind, but what it was he could not, of course, guess.

Nor could the man at the bar enlighten him.

Billy had quite a lengthy confab with the fellow, but finally had to accept the fact that the man knew nothing to tell.

When he took leave of the clubhouse it was with the intention of looking up Charley and trying to draw out some inkling of the clew he must have found. Failing in that, he would have to fall back upon McCasket.

Not that he imagined McCasket would tell him anything more, but by shadowing him he might be able to wrest the secret from him, or get hold of the same clew Hart was making use of. As a last resort, he would not hesitate to shadow Charley.

Billy satisfied his conscience with the thin excuse that he would resort to the last plan only as a final necessity.

By hook or crook he must have that thousand dollars.

In the mean time, after the departure of McCasket from the clubhouse, when he left Charley Hart so abruptly, Charley took leave more leisurely a few minutes later.

Charley did not relish the threat McCasket had made, for he believed that he would not hesitate to carry it out, if he saw fit to do so. The look on the man's face had told him that the threat was no idle one. He had shown his hand to McCasket, and would have to be prepared for the consequences, let it be what it might.

He had noted which way the proprietor turned on leaving the building.

On reaching the street, Charley turned in the same direction and caught sight of McCasket some distance away.

Without thinking why he was doing so, Charley followed the man, keeping about a regular distance behind him as they proceeded, and tried to take care not to be discovered if the man turned and looked back.

It was something in which he was not practiced, and had McCasket turned he quite likely would have discovered the follower, but he did not turn. He went straight ahead, with head down, until he met Billy Stevens, as we have recorded, and Billy joined him.

Charley continued on after them, and

took even greater care, now that he had Billy to take precaution against, and after Billy and McCasket parted, Charley continued on after McCasket to learn where he was going. He had by this time considered the matter carefully, and he believed that McCasket was in the right frame of mind to go straight to the parties most concerned in the great mystery.

CHAPTER XV.

THE COMRADES' SORRY FLIGHT.

To follow the doings of the rival reporters throughout the balance of the day would be to make this a story of double length, and we must not exceed the limit of our space.

Hence, we must omit some interesting episodes of adventure and some fine playing on the part of each to bring our story down to the time of the capture of the printer's devil comrades, and press forward thence to its closing.

About the time when we last took leave of Larry and Fritz, the telephone in the office of the city editor of the Herald-Record set up an imperative ringing that demanded immediate attention, and dropping his blue pencil, the city editor sprang to answer.

"Well, what's wanted?" he called out.

"That you, Mr. Dele?"

"Yes."

"I am Stevens," came then the announcement, "and I am hot on the Hungerfort mystery. Don't know how early or how late I shall be, but I am bound to have something, and it will be a scoop. Hold open for my copy till the very last minute, please."

"Have you got a clew?"

"Yes."

"What is it?"

"I think I had better not shout it out along this wire, sir. Will give you the whole matter as soon as I get in."

"Well, I know it must be something worth while, or you would not say hold open for you. Can you say about how much space you will want for your story? I must know that."

"Can't tell. If I get it all, we'll have half a page. I have got enough for a column, anyhow."

"All right; get in as early as you can."

"Yes, sir."

That was all, and the city editor turned back again to his desk with a smile of satisfaction on his face.

"Stevens is the boy," he said to another reporter, who was waiting around for an assignment. "He is on the track of the Hungerfort matter, and thinks he will get to the bottom of it soon."

"Hope he will, sir," said the reporter, who, by the way, was new on the force and had not shed his pin feathers, as it was said.

"There is a model for you," said Mr. Dele, further. "We have no poor reporters here, but Stevens stands at the head of the class. Hart is good, but he is not quite up to Billy. Stevens never owns himself beaten; he is up for another round, every time, and he always comes out ahead, or nearly always."

No more was said, and the blue pencil was speedily at its merciless work again.

Suddenly Mr. Dele touched the button to ring up a devil.

No one responded, however, and angry at the delay, the city editor made a dash for the door.

"Where is Larry? Where is Fritz?"

So he demanded of the first man he caught sight of.

No one knew; no one had seen either of the lads that evening, and it was thought they had not yet come on duty.

"Not yet come on duty!" cried Mr. Dele. "They should have been here an hour ago. I will attend to their cases, I promise them that. Here, you, sir," to the new reporter; "you will have to play devil for the time being."

The reporter was hustled away with a fistful of copy, and the city editor again took up the blue pencil to do execution.

Meanwhile, what of Larry and Fritz, the missing "devils?"

Let us take up that thread where we laid it down. They had just been seized by the two ruffianly fellows who had captured them.

"What is ter be done with 'em, boss?" asked the fellow with the peculiar cognomen. "You have only to say the word, and we'll fix 'em off anyhow you say; hey, Pete?"

"That's what we will, Ruba-bube, you bet."

"You will shove them into a hole and keep them there till it is convenient to let them go," said the masked man. "You needn't bother your heads about giving them anything to eat, either."

"Hully gee!" cried Larry, "but that is rather rough on us, boss."

"Serves you right; you have brought it on yourselves."

"No; we never done so," declared Fritz. "It was you been piling it on, maybe."

"Well, maybe you hold your tongue. Put them out of sight, Pete, and make sure that they have no possible means of escape till we are ready to let them go. They have got to stay here till the steamer sails."

"We'll see to that," snarled the fellow called Pete. "If they go to makin' us any trouble, they may stay a good deal longer, too."

"That is for you to decide among yourselves. All I want is to be sure that they—"

"Confound it!"

The man of the mask uttered this exclamation as the mask became dislodged from under his hat and fell to the floor!

Larry and Fritz recognized in that face one of the men of their former adventure, the one who had driven the carriage!

The two ruffians looked from their employer to each other significantly.

"I did not mean to let you see my face," the man remarked, "but, since it has happened, it does not matter. You have got better sense than to identify me under any circumstances, I hope."

The man did not replace his mask, but put it into his pocket.

"As for you boys," he added, "you will not be given the chance. And now, my men, I am off. You have done your work well, and you have been paid well, and I know you are to be trusted."

"You kin bet your life on et we are, boss," declared Ruba-bube.

A few further exchanges, and the man went out, leaving the two ruffians to deal with the hapless lads as they saw fit.

CHAPTER XVI.

WHAT HAPPENED THEM.

As soon as the man had gone, Ruba-bube closed and secured the door.

This done, he returned to where his pal was holding their youthful prisoners.

"Now, yous fellers," he grated, "look ye here: What do ye think is goin' to happen to ye next? How much do ye s'pose yer lives is worth, in our hands, ye young rascals?"

"Not a whole lot, I should say," Larry spoke up boldly.

"Well, you are about right, they ain't," assured Pete Hockle. "We didn't want to speak out rough 'fore ther gent, but if you give us ther least trouble we will slit yer throats jest as quick as we would kill two chickens. Do ye grip on to that?"

"Yes, we have got it on our take-hooks," said Larry.

"Don't try to be funny; it might not be healthy fer ye," was the sullen warning.

"We have got our money fer this job, and don't care a cent how little bother we take with you."

"You say you have got your pay in hand."

"Sure we have. Think we are fools, to do a job like this fer nothin'?"

"Then what need you care further? Let us go, and if the feller calls you down fer it, say we got away."

"No, that wouldn't be fair, nohow. We are gents, we are—me and Ruba-bube here, and we do business on ther square, every time! We have undertaken a job and we mean to carry it out."

"What if you can earn just as much more by lettin' us go?"

"Oh, come off, now; nobody would give twenty-five cents to get you out of this fix."

"Wouldn't, hey? You just go down to the Herald-Record office, and see what they will give fer us! You just go and find Billy Stevens, and see if he won't give—"

"To Hades with the Herald-Record and all belongin' to it! That is the paper that shoved me up, once, and I have got a grudge in me heart against it yet, I tell ye!" asserted Hockle. "If you belong to that concern, you needn't say a word about our lettin' ye go. I say, pardner, we have got to take care of these cusses, sure enough."

"As sure as you live," agreed the other. "But, there is only one thing we kin do with 'em jest now, put 'em in ther hole, same as we told ther feller."

"In with 'em, with no funder parley about it, is my motter," grated the other rascal.

Pulling Larry after him to the opposite side of the room, the other fellow following him with Fritz, Pete opened a door which the lads had not noticed, and into a dark and noisome hole they were dragged.

The men proceeded to bind them, and soon they were even more helpless than they had been in their predicament of that morning, for now both were gagged as well as bound.

"Now, then, cuss ye, stay here!" cried Pete, as he and Ruba-bube withdrew. "If ye ain't alive when we call again, it don't matter. The rats will keep ye company."

Both ruffians laughed in a hateful way, and closed the door upon the hapless comrades, leaving them in utter darkness.

And barely had the door been closed when rats were heard scampering about, and Larry felt one run over his foot. Whatever they did, if they could do anything at all, would have to be done in a hurry.

Larry got upon his feet as soon as he could, having noticed when the door closed that Fritz had been left standing braced against the wall, and moving his feet the little he could, each one about half an inch at a time, he presently came to where Fritz was.

It took him some time to make his comrade understand what was wanted, but finally he succeeded.

Their former experience had given Larry ideas.

Getting himself back to back with Fritz, his fingers were soon at work at the cords around Fritz's wrists.

By this time the rats were scampering all around them, for the place appeared to be literally alive with the rodents, and both boys realized the necessity of speedy liberation.

It was a slow and tedious task, but, finally, Larry's perseverance brought its accomplishment.

As soon as Fritz's hands were free, the rest was easy.

"Hully gee!" cried Larry, as soon as he had the use of his tongue. "These rats will eat us up, Fritzey boy!"

"Yaw, you was yust about right," assented Fritz. "Maybe it was better we get us out of this places pretty quick, ain't it? I not want play Chinees and eat me some rats."

"That's what's the matter, Fritzey-boy, sure pop."

Larry was feeling in his pockets for a match while speaking, and now he found one and lighted it.

As the light flashed upon the scene, at least a score of big rats went scampering away in every direction, and in a moment the boys had the miserable hole to themselves.

A gas fixture was sighted, but it was so rusty from long disuse that the match was nearly burned out before Fritz could turn the cut-off.

The gas was there, and they soon had plenty of light.

This much accomplished, they looked around leisurely to see just what kind of a place they were in, and to learn the quickest way out.

Trying the door, they discovered that it was secured so well on the outer side that it was altogether useless for them to waste time trying to open it, if there was any other possible exit.

Two sides of their prison were of stone, the other sides being of wood. One of these contained the door mentioned, and the other side, opposite, looked to be of plain boarding. A closer inspection, however, disclosed the outlines of what looked to be another door.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE UNEXPECTED HAPPENS.

"Hully gee!" exclaimed Larry, on making the discovery. "This looks like a door, Fritzey-boy."

"Yaw, that's what it does, Larry," acquiesced the comrade. "Yust see if we can open it, and maybe they won't find us here when they come back; ain't it, maybe?"

"I guess maybe it is, Fritzey-boy. Lend your shoulder a minute, and we'll try the strength of it, anyhow."

Both threw their shoulders against the door together, taking for granted that it was a door, and they met with a surprise for which they were not prepared.

The door gave way easily enough, its whole frame being rotten, and the comrades pitched headlong into a pit, or something of the kind, on the other side, and the wonder was that the fall did not break their necks.

It did not, however, and Larry voiced his usual exclamation:

"Hully gee!"

"It looks like we got here," said Fritz.

"That's what it does, Fritzey-boy, fer a fact."

They got upon their feet, surprised to find that they were not injured in the least, save for a few scratches, and the light that came through the opening enabled them to look around.

They were in a hole perhaps seven feet deep, from the level of the floor

above. At one side lay the frame and steps of a staircase, which had rotted away and evidently had been thrown down. It was a narrow place, and it ran back further than they could see.

"Come on!" enjoined Larry, "we might as well see all there is of it."

"Yaw, that was right," from Fritz.

They explored, and soon discovered that the place was a tunnel running back into the solid earth.

It was stoned up, and had apparently been constructed to stay. For what purpose it had been used did not concern the two investigators; they had no interest further than to find a speedy way out.

A few steps carried them beyond the pale of the light shining from the place they had just left, but both had some matches, and by lighting these, first one and then the other, they were enabled to see their way along. Nothing obstructed the passage, and presently they came to the opposite end.

Here was found a flight of steps in good order, apparently, and as they stopped, voices reached their ears.

Larry caught Fritz by the arm to enjoin silence.

Their match went out at the same moment, and light was seen streaming through some cracks above their heads.

"Fritzey-boy," warned Larry, "if you ever kept still, you want to keep still now. We have got to creep up these steps like two cats after a mouse, and find out where we're at."

"That was all right," whispered Fritz. "I bet you Fritz Kupfernickel can be yust so still as you can, Larry Brennan. Go on, and I was right behind you, maybe, ain't it?"

They found the stairs fairly substantial, and only twice did the steps give forth any sound under their feet, and each time the comrades stopped short, and so did their hearts, seemingly.

At the top was a small landing.

There the comrades stopped, sat down, and listened.

"Your accursed newspaper will never get this piece of news," an angry voice declared. "You have run your head into a trap, and you must suffer the consequences."

"Well, you can't any more than kill me, and I think you had better go slow about that," was answered, and both lads were startled, for it was the voice of Charley Hart!

"We can do that much, and that will effectually do the business for you," was the rejoinder. "The Herald-Record is not going to blow the trumpet this time, over its great astuteness."

"It will not be my fault," bravely averred Charley. "You give me an opportunity to escape and write up my story, and—"

"Ha! you have not got it on paper, then? That is a lucky thing; I am glad you made that statement. Gentlemen, this game is still in our own hands, is it not?"

"It is! it is!" at least two others responded.

"And all we have got to do is to hold fast to this fellow till after the steamer sails; then we will not care what they do. The trail will be lost to them for good and all."

"Can you guarantee to keep him here?" another asked.

"Well, you bet on that!" was answered by one who had not before spoken. "Pay me my price, and he will stay here, you bet!"

"What is your price?"

"Well, seein' how 'portant it 'pears to be, how'll two hundred hit you?"

"Too much."

"Fer all the risk I have ter run?"

"You can take care of the risk; we'll give you \$50—"

"No, sir! You make it a hundred, and we will see to him and keep him as long as you say. But you have got to put down ther money, right in my hand, before I will do a thing in the matter."

"Here is the money! Now, how will you keep him?"

"I have got a handy place here; just let me show you, and see if you don't say he will stay there."

Larry and Fritz knew what was coming

"And this is the way you treat me, after the fair way in which I dealt with you, is it, Dr Graves?" spoke up Charley Hart

The man who was crossing the floor paused, and this gave Larry and Fritz time to act. Larry whispering to his comrade, they slipped over the edge of the little platform and dropped to the floor below.

"When obstacles appear in the way those obstacles have to be removed," was the response to Charley's demand. "You now know too much—more than I intended you should know. You were too honest to suit my other purpose, and you are not to be trusted at large now. Show us where you will put him, my man, and let's have the business done with."

The steps were heard again, and, after a moment, a door opened and a flood of light filled the end of the underground tunnel.

CHAPTER XVIII.

ON THE HOME STRETCH.

Larry and Fritz had taken care to put themselves out of sight.

They had found refuge under the stairs, and were not likely to be discovered, unless the men came down.

"There ye see it!" said the man, "It is a tunnel that used to be handy as a secret means of connection between two houses, years ago, and was used by a band that had things their own way for a good many years."

"And is it not used now?"

"No; at the other end the stairs is down and the door is nailed up. No one ever goes down here."

"Just the place for him, then. Let us bind him even more securely than he is, and drop him over. It will not kill him, and you can starve him into promising not to give you away, before he is let out."

"If he ever gets out," suggested the other, grimly.

"And if that other can be got hold of, he will be sent to join him," another remarked.

They stepped back for a few moments. When they reappeared they had their prisoner in hand. He was lifted over the edge of the platform, lowered, and allowed to drop.

Charley struck upon his feet, but his feet being tied, he toppled over and fell to the floor.

Larry and Fritz noticed that he was gagged.

"There you are, reporter!" cried one of the men, vengefully. "The Herald-Record will be minus one of its smart young men, for a few days."

They closed the door, and no sooner had they done so than Larry was out from his place and up the steps, having first whispered to Fritz to remain where he was.

Applying his ear to the door, he listened.

"Now, so far so good," he heard one

of the men say. "The child has been restored to its mother, who is now reconciled to the change, believing that she has been cast off by her husband, and that she will soon be in a distant land. Then Hungerfort can be taken care of, and eventually his estate can be divided among us. It has been a clever scheme, and it would have worked well if one thing had not miscarried. But, it will come out all right now."

"Well, what now?"

"Nothing, till four o'clock in the morning."

"And what then?"

"Why, the carriage to take the woman and child to the steamer. Do not forget the address—No. — street. The steamer is at Pier No. —."

"All right; there can be no further mishaps in the case, now, and we are sure of coming out on top in spite of police, reporters, and everything else. This is the kind of business to sharpen our wits."

A few further remarks along the same line; then Larry heard them fasten the door to the tunnel and presently the light disappeared, as all left the room.

Larry drew a breath of relief and quickly descending the stairs, voiced his favorite exclamation:

"Hully gee!" just loud enough to be heard. "You would be in a pickle, sure enough, now, Charley, if it wasn't for me and Fritzey-boy; but we are on hand to beat the band, you bet!"

The boy struck a match as he spoke, and the look of surprise in Charley's eyes caused Larry to laugh.

"Get that thing out of his mouth, Fritzey-boy," Larry ordered, "and then we will find some way to get out of here, you can bet! Oh! the Herald-Record will come out on top yet, Charley, old boy, for the printer's devil detectives are going to get in the scoop for you!"

The reporter was soon released, and explanations were exchanged.

"That thousand dollars is mine, and a hundred to each of you, if I can only get my story to the paper ahead of Billy Stevens!" said Charley, excitedly. "But, I cannot write it here in the dark, and, even if I could, we may not be able to get out of here."

"Never give up!" encouraged Larry. "Me and my comrade have plenty of light in our boudoir at the other end of the tunnel, and you can write your story there while we and devil Fritzey work a way out. We will get there in time, you bet, if it takes our hair off! Our paper will make the scoop, and we must get it in ahead of Billy, sure pop!"

They hastened back to the other chamber, to call it such, where, by means of the broken staircase, they were able to climb out.

The reporter looked at his watch, and saw that he would have to be making "copy" every minute if he wanted his story to be in time for the press, so he set Larry and Fritz at work cutting a hole through the door with their knives, while he began writing in his note-book as fast as he could make his pencil fly.

It was slow work for the comrades, for the door was thick and their knives not the sharpest, but they kept steadily at it, although their hands became blistered. They took turns, one resting while the other worked, and Charley every now and then encouraged them with a word concerning the hundred dollars they were to receive.

The time passed rapidly, more rapidly than the reporter desired, for he felt that he must finish his story there, even if the way of escape opened before he was done.

Then, too, he was eager to get it done so that he could take a turn at the work of cutting through.

The object was, to cut a hole large enough to reach through and unfasten the door, and if they could accomplish that, they believed that the rest would be comparatively easy.

They worked, steadily, stubbornly, hour after hour, and at last Charley closed his book with a snap.

"There!" he cried, "that is done; now it must be got to the office if it costs me a leg to carry it there."

Slipping the book into his outside coat pocket, he said:

"Now, boys, let me take a hand at that work. I have got a pretty good knife which I have been holding back for the last inning."

The boys made way for him, and he went at the work with a vim that made the small chips fly. The comrades had made the hole nearly large enough, and in about twenty minutes Charley completed the task.

"There, Larry, it is big enough for your slender arm, anyhow," he assumed. "See what you can find on the other side."

Larry ran his arm through, and to his delight was able to open the door.

"Hurrah!" cried Charley. "Now for the office, my lads, and see what a smile will spread over the countenance of Mr. Dele when he reads this story. You lead the way, Larry, and—But, Great Scott! what is all that about?"

Loud voices, and the sound of a struggle, were heard, coming nearer, and, in the same moment, the door burst open and into the room came the two scoundrels—Ruba-bube and Pete Hockle, and another with them, and in their hands, a prisoner—Billy Stevens!

CHAPTER XIX.

LARRY BEATS THE BAND.

The city editor of the Herald-Record was pacing his office, a deep frown on his face and his fists clinched.

Everything had gone wrong, that night. The absence of the "devils" had been the first thing to upset him, and one thing after another on top of that, until he was nearly wild.

And now, worst of all, Billy Stevens had not yet appeared, and it was nearly time to go to press. Neither had Hart been sent on no special assignment. It was not so important about his copy, but Stevens was wanted.

The minutes passed; the foreman of the printing room came in to say that other matter was ready to fill the space, if Billy's story had not come, and the city editor was watching the clock and giving his favorite reporter the benefit of every moment possible. It would be impossible to hold back much longer; the minutes were speeding rapidly.

Finally, the order was given to go to press, and the editor dropped into his chair as if he cared not whether he ever got out another paper or not.

The next moment, though, running steps were heard, and into the sanctum dashed Larry Brennan!

"Stop the presses!" he cried. "Greatest scoop ever heard tell of in—"

"Hold your tongue!" roared the city editor, leaping up. "Have you got Billy Stevens' story?"

"No; but I have got Charley Hart's, and it is a full 'count of the great Hungerfort mystery, first to last—"

"Quick!" snatching the note-book out of Larry's hand. "Run and tell Kidder to stop the press and lift out that space-filler. Scoot!"

Larry "scooted," but the city editor

was right at his heels, tearing the leaves of the note-book into "takes" as he ran, and when he reached the composing room he soon created a lively hustling there.

While he waited for a proof—which would be had very soon, the way the typos were sticking, he demanded of Larry an account of what he knew, and Larry gave a running narrative of the night's adventures, as briefly as possible and as known to the reader.

"And we were just comin' out of there," he concluded, "when we ran plumb against them same fellers, with Billy Stevens in their grasp, and there was the liveliest kind of a scrimmage, you bet! We pitched into 'em, red-hot, but they was too many for us, and when they got Charley foul, I seen that there was only one thing to be done, and I did it. I grabbed Charley's book out of his pocket and cut fer it, and I got here in time. Oh! the Herald-Record is the stuff, you bet, Mr. Dele!"

The city editor allowed that Larry was right, and complimented him upon his quick wit and brave action in the matter.

As soon as possible, Mr. Dele put on his hat and hastened from the building, Larry with him. To the nearest police station they hastened, where Mr. Dele's story created a commotion, as may be imagined.

The sergeant in charge got his men together in a hurry and led them to the scene of the reported scrimmage, the city editor and the "devil" accompanying them. They were just in the nick of time to intercept and capture the men who had imprisoned the reporters.

Charley and Billy, and Fritz with them, were found in the cellar of the building, nearly dead from the rough handling they had received, and from the way in which they had been left bound, but they were speedily released and were soon able to speak for themselves.

Billy's first thought was for the story he had commenced but had been unable to finish.

As they had been left gagged, he and Charley had had no opportunity to talk the matter over.

When told that Charley had sent in the full account, completely solving the mystery, his face dropped, but he quickly recovered from the chagrin, to all outward appearances, and congratulated his confrere upon his success.

But the work was not yet done; Larry gave the further information he had, the last things he had heard the men in the room saying, which was one point that neither reporter had been able to get hold of. The police sprang to pursuit, and Mrs. Hungerfort and her child were recovered, and arrests were made.

It, indeed, had been a villainous scheme from the first. Dr. Graves, the pretended friend of Mr. Hungerfort, together with another arch knave as heartless as himself, had planned to ruin Mr. Hungerfort to gain possession of his wealth, in some way in which they were connected with him in a gigantic speculation. It had to be done within a certain time, or it could not be done at all. There was a mystery about the birth of Mrs. Hungerfort. The doctor told her a frightful story of her parentage, and in shame the poor woman had left her husband rather than bear his reproaches, which she was led to believe would be heaped upon her. A letter was prepared, purporting to be from her to her husband, in which she was made to appear as the vilest of creatures, and that was her confession. That letter, however,

failed to fall into Mr. Hungerfort's hands, and hence he at once made public his loss and stirred up the city.

When all things were explained, husband and wife and child met in one fond embrace, and their happiness and confidence were even greater than before. The prime scoundrels of the plot were punished to the fullest extent, and the minor ones were given their just deserts.

The doctor had wanted the story of Mrs. Hungerfort's birth printed, and for that reason had given a hint of it to the reporters, but he had burned his own fingers.

Needless to say, that issue of the Herald-Record was a success, and all the other journals went and concealed their diminished heads for a day, figuratively speaking.

The prize was awarded to Charley Hart, although the proprietor of the paper declared his belief that the "devil" comrades were entitled to something for their part in the great work. Thereupon, Charley told what he had promised to give them, and the proprietor immediately drew two checks for the amounts, in order that Charley might retain his thousand unbroken.

So ended what had been one of the greatest sensations of the day in the great metropolis, and the altogether insatiable reading public was ready, in twenty-four hours, for another!

Larry and Fritz, having had a taste of the excitement incident to the life of reporter-detectives, were ready, too, for anything that might offer, and felt in their bones that they were of some importance to their newspaper, after all.

THE END.

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